

Banners in Asia

W. L. RIVER

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS



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| UBASHA | Khan of the Torgut Horde, descendant of Genghis Khan. |
| ZEBEK | Cousin of Ubasha, President of the Torgut Council. |
| CEDAR-CHAB | Younger sister of Ubasha. |
| TEMURU | A Torgut general. |
| SUBUTAI | Son of Temuru, a warrior. |
| GRANDMA | Mother of Temuru. |
| GEDESU | Brother of Subutai, a wealthy shepherd. |
| GHASHUN | Wife of Gedesu. |
| BAGHA | A Shaman wizard. |
| LOOSANG | Chief Lama of the Torguts. |
| VASILOV | A Cossack hostage. |
| LEV ZOLOTSKY | A Jewish slave. |

In the appendix, a complete list of characters will be found and a Key to Pronunciation, together with a Glossary, Historical Note, and Bibliography.

FOREWORD



In undertaking to re-create the story of an historical event, the novelist must necessarily admit, a priori, two limitations.

The first is the hegemony, so to speak, of the historical fact—the essentials of which must be scrupulously followed. In the case of the great Torgut migration of 1771, what faces one is almost the reverse of this nominal law. The limitation, here, is the lack of historical fact—or rather, the difficulty of deciphering it.

The second limitation is that in dealing with an alien people, with another time than one's own, a place never seen, one must somehow learn to portray these things almost intuitively—almost as though he were, in this particular case, a Torgut himself. Yet he must do this without sacrificing that universal human content which makes us all, in our own time and place, brothers—contemporaries, in a sense—of men who lived in an earlier, strange part of the world.

The novelist must thus discover a way, within these limitations, and within his own abilities as a writer, to create a living story that has meaning for men to-day. He must take all that is known by historians, geographers, ethnologists, anthropologists, et cetera,—and by the exercise of his own humanity and imagination, he must so diffuse these facts throughout his creation, he must so order and illumine them, that a work familiar though strange, intuitive though a product of reason, stirring and meaningful, though alien, results.

In the story of this almost incredible Torgut migration, my own interest was first aroused by a passage, little more

than a page, in Demetrius Boulger's *History of China*. Here, in a fragmentary report, Boulger noted that in 1771 the Torgut Mongols—half a million of them, with nearly five million animals—travelled almost three thousand miles from the Volga River, in Russia, to the Tian Shan Mountains in China, fleeing the oppression of Catherine the Second, called *the Great*. This migration had little direct bearing on the course of either the Russian or the Chinese Empire; and therefore Boulger treated it as little more than a semi-legendary footnote from the back-districts of Asia. Yet in spite of the darkness and conjecture surrounding the migration of the Torguts, their story seemed to me to contain a profound human meaning.

Here were migration and disaster on an epic scale. In days before historical times, such great mass movements of people were relatively frequent, helping to shape the world, ethnologically and culturally, as we have inherited it. The last great people's migration—on the borderland between the archaic and the historical—was the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The nearest modern parallel, perhaps, was the recent flight of the Catalonian people from Barcelona. Our own times may be brewing the ingredients of great mass migrations by democratic peoples from cities and lands invaded by alien oppressors. But nothing in all modern history has yet equalled the migration of the Torgut Mongols from the tyranny of the Russian Tsarina—nor the bitter irony of their eventual captivity and destruction, brought about through the collusion and misleadership of their own priests and princes, under the Emperor of China.

How could such a story be all but lost in history?

It is useless to bring forward all the ideas that spring up in answer. The historians, necessarily, are dealing with the obvious events of the historical world. Viewed in such light, the megalomania of Hitler or Mussolini may seem far more significant than the instinctive motion of peoples toward freedom. To the novelist, however, it is the latter

consideration which must bear the greater weight. And the novelist, in such case where little has been recorded, must find his answer in the truest historical guide of all—the mind and the heart of humanity.

In the case of the Torgut migration, all but the vague outlines of basic facts have been lost. There are only five major documents which bear directly on this event. These works, described in the *Historical Note* at the end of the book, are contradictory and somewhat biased.

The task of unravelling these contradictions—of finding further historical data on the migration and the Torgut Mongols, how they looked and lived and how they came to be in Russia, in the first place—of the problems that faced them, a nomadic people, under the agricultural and industrial thrust of Imperial Russia—of how they travelled to China, the actual course of their migration, the topography, the flora and fauna they encountered on the way—of the reasons why a heroic people, returning a great distance to their original land, made so many almost blind and contradictory movements—of the economic and human elements in their own midst that contributed heavily to their ultimate disaster—all these points required research and then reconstruction into a novel of a complex humanity struggling, in its own time and place, for many of the same things people to-day are seeking.

To me, the tragic story of the Torguts is not an isolated fact lost in the legendary borderlands of history. Rather it is an almost modern example of man's eternal search for peace and freedom. The irony of their being delivered into greater oppression than that from which they fled, is the irony of unfinished history. For history, which truly includes all the migrations and struggles of people, no matter where or when, is the story of man's motion toward something we shall ultimately achieve—the freedom, the peace, the brotherhood, of all mankind.

W. L. R.

BOOK ONE



A Man's path is Only One

MOTTO OF THE TORGUTS

*“Where such peoples live,
there is no longer place for
our herds to pasture, nor
for men like ours to live
in peace.”*

—Genghis Khan

CHAPTER ONE



Soft falling was the rain, so soft that each drop, it seemed, was more tempted than the last to open like crystal wings and fall lightly as snow. Indeed, to judge from the unusual pallor of the evening sky, probably in the higher air it was already snowing ; and as though this colder atmosphere were slowly sinking to earth of its own weight, the opaque glow came lower and lower. The frozen ground began to glitter darkly where the falling rain shattered like frost.

Through this wintry gloom, a young Torgut horseman came riding toward a promontory still faintly outlined against the evening sky. He halted. From here he could see, far across the dark channels of the Volga River, the lights of Fort Jenat flickering in the west.

It was the night of January 5, 1771—Christmas Eve, according to the Russian calendar ; the first day of the twelfth month in the Year of the Hare, according to the Torgut astrologers.

The young Torgut, gazing intently at the distant fort, was keenly aware of the grave nature of the moment. Fort Jenat represented far more than its own stone walls and wooden buildings, or even its Cossack garrison. It symbolized the far-flung and mighty power of the Russian Tsarina, Catherine the Second, encircling the Torgut pasture-land with many forts and garrisons like Jenat. Against the Russian Empire, which relentlessly encroached upon these lands where the Torguts had lived in freedom

for one hundred and forty years, the Torgut Mongols were planning to rebel at dawn.

The decision had been made that afternoon, at a great tribal meeting attended by more than fifty thousand shepherds and warriors of the Torgut Banner. They had been given muskets and two brass cannon with which to fight their neighbours, the Kirghiz. Instead, they met on the great plain near Lake Bish-Uba, in the east ; and there they recounted all the wrongs and losses suffered at the hands of the Tsarina.

Men told how they were no longer free and prosperous in their own lands, how the Tsarina demanded their wealth in her taxes and their lives in her wars—life had become nothing but war and taxes, from which they received no return. Others spoke of how, in their own time, Torgut craftsmen had ceased making many of the things their people used, and how they were forced to buy these things from the Tsarina at excessive prices. And still others called attention to alien ways, of living, of religion, of property and law and politics, which the Tsarina was imposing on them in place of their own ancient and pastoral ways.

Princes, priests, and men of the people spoke of these and other matters, all speaking with similar feeling—that the limit of Torgut patience and passivity had been reached. Rebellion and flight—these weapons of defence must be used. Otherwise, all felt, their people would cease to exist, except as impoverished slaves of the Russian Tsarina. And with unanimous decision, with wild and tumultuous shouts, the fifty thousand Torguts at the great meeting vowed to take all their animals and their families and to flee from these Volga lands where they could no longer be free.

The Torgut khan, Ubasha, spoke last of all. The Tsarina's armies, he said, would try to keep them from leaving. But if they left suddenly, to-morrow at dawn, the Cossack garrisons would be taken by surprise. If they were swift and determined, he said, they could reach a place

safely beyond the Tsarina's power. And then they might make new terms with the Tsarina—to return here as friends, instead of slaves—or else they could seek new lands, where peace and freedom might be found.

When Ubasha Khan ended his speech, all the men cheered tumultuously again. And then, wheeling their horses, they galloped back toward the Torgut winter camps on the eastern bank of the Volga.

The young solitary horseman had outdistanced them all, spurred by a boyish desire to be first at the village hoshuns with the great news. But when he neared the Volga, when he rode toward the promontory and halted for a moment in the soft cold rain, he felt a momentary fear.

The power of the Russian Tsarina, of which Fort Jenat was merely a small part, was so mighty and widespread that it seemed almost impossible for his people to escape. And the least warning, the slightest hint to the garrison at Jenat, might make the dawn of January 6 a tragedy rather than an historic occasion for his people.

The young Torgut's heart, beating with exultation and sudden fear, seemed like the beating hooves of fifty thousand riders, scattering to their village hoshuns all up and down the east bank of the Volga, thundering and shaking the very earth.

Surely the Cossacks would hear the commotion—surely they'd be warned!

He listened intently. He could hear nothing but the whispering rain, which grew softer and colder, falling more and more like snow in the dark air. The wind blew from the west, away from the fort on the far bank of the river—like a wind of good omen, he thought.

The young Torgut, Subutai, was the son of a warrior, the Saissang Temuru. Until the great meeting near Bish-Uba that afternoon, he had been considered only a shepherd, a boy. But now he too was a warrior, a man. For at the close of the meeting he had been given one of the silver-

mounted muskets which the Torguts had received from the Tsarina to use fighting the Kirghiz. And he smiled in the dark, holding the musket delicately across his thighs, thinking that now this fine weapon might be used in protecting his own people against pursuit by the Cossack troops.

Subutai sat his white mare well forward, almost standing in the short stirrups, still peering intently at the fort.

His long coat, lined with wool, was slit down the sides for ease in the saddle. When he moved slightly, a knife and fire-striker tinkled on a short chain which hung from his broad blue belt, and his mare twitched her wet ears at the sound. Although his breath was beginning to steam in the chill air, he wore his coat folded open at the breast, and the fur lappets of his helmet-shaped cap were upturned. His face had a lean strength which, like all his people's, appeared Mongoloid mostly because of his cheek-bones and the partial slant of his eyes ; from beneath his cap a short queue hung down his neck in the eastern tradition of his people.

Suddenly he gripped his musket tensely, and his upper lip, on which there were only a few dark hairs as yet, came down tightly against his teeth.

For on a fragmentary gust of wind from over the river there came the sound of bells, dimly yet wildly. The great iron clappers were tumbling madly, as though to empty down on the distant fort a hail of warning from the upturned metal bowls.

But there were no further sounds. And his eyes, grown telescopic from life on the sea-like steppe, detected no motion of alarm among the dark buildings on the distant bank of the Volga.

Then he remembered that this was one of the Russian festivals for which they rang the great bells ; and he knew that all was still well, all still unknown, across the dark shiny ice and the deep black streaks of open water, where

the Christmas bells tolled in the cold night and the Cossacks drank vodka near crackling stoves.

Yet his grip had barely relaxed on the wet stock of his musket when a new sound came from the south. Riders were fast approaching on the road which, following the eastern bank of the Volga, stretched all the way from Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea to Saratov in the north. Quietly, nudging his horse with his knees, Subutai withdrew down the little slope and waited, motionless in the dark, for the riders to pass. He fingered his musket nervously, but when they came nearly abreast, he saw it was Cedar-chab riding, like a slim boy, fast as a lance between her two escorts. Clutching musket and reins with one hand, Subutai drew a long whip over the flanks of his mare. Galloping after the riders, his voice leaped wildly as his heart, shouting the battle-cry of his people :

“ Ya-bonnah ! ”

As he gained ground on the riders, one of the men turned with a scowl. But as Subutai drew abreast, his expression changed. He smiled sourly at the musket gripped in the hand of the beardless youth ; but unable to conceal his curiosity, he muttered :

“ What’s all the excitement, little warrior ? ”

Subutai flushed, looking quickly toward Cedar-chab, to see if she had heard the man’s patronizing comment. She rode straight ahead, neither turning her head nor seeming to hear. For the moment he was glad to escape her notice, and he looked at the rider again.

“ I asked,” said the man, more politely this time, “ what’s the excitement, brother ? ”

Now it was Subutai’s turn to smile tolerantly, for he pretended that he had to bend low in his saddle to hear the other man, who was a full head shorter than he.

“ It was decided to-day, little father,” he said. “ We decided.”

"For heaven's sake," shouted the rider, "decided what, man?"

"To leave," said Subutai, "to leave Russia to-night."

At this news the second rider, who hadn't spoken, rose in his stirrups with a great shout.

"Ya-bonnah! we leave!" he cried.

But the first rider, in spite of his own excitement, said:

"That's nothing new, man. Where do we go?"

"To the River Jaik, perhaps the River Emba," said Subutai, "where we can make the Tsarina come to terms!"

At this, the first rider leaped in his stirrups, too. Both men, shouting wildly, nudged their horses to a faster gallop, as though racing to be first with the news at the hoshuns of Ubasha Khan.

Cedar-chab neither turned nor seemed to hear, but her horse sprang into a mad gallop ahead of the men. Subutai's white mare was a fit match for her own, since it came from the stables of Ubasha Khan, a prize Subutai had won at the summer races. The mare was a tough, fast pony of the Bar-Kul breed, far fleetier than the Turkoman horses of Cedar-chab's escorts. He passed them swiftly and sped after Cedar-chab herself.

Rain had finally changed to snow, and sight and sound of the escorts were soon lost in the distance behind. Cedar-chab was barely two lengths ahead. It was as though they were completely alone, of all the living, in the snow-filled night. Many times, in their not distant childhood, he and Cedar-chab had raced together in sunlight over the pasturelands. But now it was different, as though the great meeting to-day, the musket, the departure from Russia on to-morrow's dawn, had changed matters between them for ever. Bewilderingly, Subutai's face became hot with blood so that the cold flakes, striking his lean cheeks, seemed no more than steam drifting back from Cedar-chab's elusive breath.

They approached a deep wide gully lined with trees.

Subutai, his thoughts in a tumult of confusion, plunged recklessly down the steep bank. Whether Cedar-chab herself turned aside from the path and up the gully, or whether he, in his reckless ride, forced her in that direction, it was impossible to tell. But they soon found themselves at a halt, nearly face to face, under the trees that were black and wet.

"Well, Subutai!" she said, checking his recklessness with an enigmatic glance, so that he became more confused than before.

She shook the snow from her furred coat; and with baffling serenity she brushed snow from her little fur cap with its red button of rank, and then she readjusted it at a slight angle—all this time holding him immobilized by the calm movement of her hands. Only her eyes betrayed the same tremulous uncertainty that quivered in Subutai's heart, and these she lowered, although it was dark beneath the black trees.

She too, thought Subutai, had changed somehow. Here suddenly she was no longer the little sister of Ubasha Khan with whom he had galloped among the summer herds care-free as though both were boys. Something had come between them, so that they scarcely could glance at one another. She had become a strange lady, a princess, and he, a warrior.

He wet his lips and tried to speak, but he could only finger his musket uncomfortably.

"Well, Subutai," she said again, this time in a lower and less confident voice, still with her eyes lowered.

The two shouting escorts thundered down through the gully and on.

"I——" said Subutai, flushing and clearing his throat. "They made me a fighter to-day."

"You were always best with the lance," she said faintly, "best of all in the races, too."

"They made me lieutenant," he said, speaking more

confidently, "lieutenant to my father, Temuru. And look," he added, with a sudden burst of pride, "they gave me a Russian musket, too—isn't it a beauty?"

Cedar-chab had withdrawn one of her fur gloves, and she reached out in the dark to touch the musket. The cold silver mounting stung her fingers, and she quickly withdrew her hand.

"Yes," she said, shivering a little. "Some day you shall be saissang yourself, Subutai. Who knows? A general perhaps—if all goes well."

Subutai felt the same chill doubt as she.

"Yes," he replied soberly, "much may go badly. . . . But just the same, they shan't stop us now!"

"Kichinskoi, the Russian commissioner, knows we plan to leave," murmured Cedar-chab, frowning at the tip of her red leather boot.

"Yes, but does he believe it?" Subutai said slowly. "He says we're like a bear on a chain."

"He knows we plan to break that chain to-morrow."

"What, were you over the river?" said Subutai. "And who told Kichinskoi that?"

"The Prince Gáldan, my sister's husband."

"But why? Won't Galdan and Donderkov leave?" said Subutai. "The Prince Zebek said so—he said they'll burn the Russian towns and stanitzas, if the ice has frozen enough to cross. And he said if our western people can't cross, they'll surround the forts to keep the Cossacks from following us."

"They'll do none of these things," said Cedar-chab. "The ice can't possibly freeze in time for the Derbet uluses to cross the Volga. But Donderkov and Galdan won't join us, anyway. Only my sister Sand-chab is coming."

This news was still more sobering, and Subutai's hand closed tightly around his musket again.

"What of the fort?" he said. "I watched, but they merely rang the bells."

"The Fort Jenat? They drink and sleep—all but the seventeen men who set forth in a barge yesterday morning. They were to travel upstream and cross, and then join our warriors to help fight the Kirghiz."

For a moment, Subutai wondered if his friend Vasilov might be among the seventeen Cossacks. He felt sure that the Russian soldiers would be seized by his own people for hostage, and he hoped no harm would come to Vasilov. But then he smiled and said :

"That's good ! Kichinskoi will be sure we're out fighting the Kirghiz, and he won't move a finger—until it's too late !"

"And did you fight the Kirghiz, Lieutenant Subutai ?" said Cedar-chab, smiling too.

"That was only a good trick at the Tsarina's expense !" said Subutai, chuckling. "Getting more muskets and powder, and two brass cannon from her ! It was a fine excuse for the great meeting, too."

"And at the meeting," said Cedar-chab, "the Prince Zebek said all those fiery things about Galdan and Donderkov. And my brother Ubasha rose to speak, but said nothing contrary to Zebek. And all you men cheered Zebek's words. . . . Is it so, or not so ?"

"So," said Subutai, in a tone of amazement. "But how could you know ?"

"Ah 'he Prince Zebek," said Cedar-chab, "he's a brave talker."

"That he is !" said Subutai enthusiastically. But immediately he bit his tongue, for it seemed that Cedar-chab was unduly interested in Zebek, and this disturbed him curiously. He said hesitantly, "Ubasha is a fine talker, too."

"And did the Prince Zebek speak for China, Subutai ? Did he say we should travel across Asia and reconquer our old homeland, Djungaria ?"

"Why, no," said Subutai, in surprise. "Why, this is our

homeland, Cedar-chab—here by the Volga where we were born, where we raced the summer clouds near Bish-Uba——”

Cedar-chab laid her hand gently on Subutai's thigh for a moment and said, whispering under the soughing black trees :

“ We shall never return, little Subutai—it's no longer the same——”

“ But Ubasha said—but the River Jaik, or the Emba—and Zebek agreed ! ” said Subutai confusedly. But whether the confusion came from some tribal memory stirred by her words about Djungaria, or from her disturbing interest in the Prince Zebek, or perhaps from the touch of her hand on his thigh, Subutai was unable to tell. He flushed and said, more coherently, “ Ubasha thinks the Tsarina will have to let us return here as friends, not slaves—else we stay by the Emba ! ”

“ Perchance we shall dwell by the Emba,” said Cedar-chab. “ But the Prince Zebek is a clever man.”

“ Ubasha is clever, too,” Subutai said, resenting the extreme interest she seemed to take in Zebek, always mentioning his name. “ He is even more clever,” he added defiantly.

“ More clever at avoiding decisions,” said Cedar-chab. “ Tell me, Subutai,” she said, lightly, but with her suddenly tremulous eyes lowered again, “ would the Prince Zebek make me a good husband, do you think ? ”

The snow had ceased, and from the trees the flakes melted and slowly dripped. Now the wind, above, was ripping the clouds so that many stars hung liquid as sword-tips in the sky. The bare branches of the trees were twisted in agony under the pointed stars.

“ Well, Subutai ? ” she said at last.

He said roughly, “ It was to tell me this that you turned me aside. Is it so, or not so ? ”

“ Perhaps it is so,” she said in a faint voice.

“ But he is an old man, thirty-five or more ! ”

"Yet my sister Sand-chab married an old man, still she has kept her friendship for the Lama Loosang," said Cedar-chab.

Her lips trembled, but she tried to smile.

He spoke harshly, seizing her hand. "Has he spoken yet?"

"No, but I know that he plans. . . . He has little wealth, but Ubasha is weak. My brother needs friends."

He scowled at her in the dark.

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because, little brother, I——"

"Well?" said Subutai, still harshly, still grasping her hand. "Why do you plague me so? Why do you tell me these things?"

"Because," she said faintly, suddenly leaning her head against his broad shoulder, "because I'm so unhappy, little Subutai——"

Subutai's heart beat madly for a moment, and he swung far around in his saddle so that his lips caught hers; and through her furred coat, which fell open, he cupped the round flesh of her breast; and for a moment she scarcely stirred.

The violent pounding of her heart under his hand made him loosen his hold and raise his head. And as they both looked, above them, a meteor came through the cold sky with a dazzling head and a smoky blue shaft, fading red like an ill and foreboding omen.

"Now I have broken the law," he said in a low voice, lowering his eyes to hers. And she stared at him through the dripping air and the dark, as though they were caught in the enchantment of some tragic idea; and she said in a strange tone, almost of wonder, "There will come no law between us, O Subutai, not even death."

For a moment, thus, they stared at one another, chilled as though the air had suddenly grown still colder than before, caught in the wondrous web of some fatal thought

still unformed in the head of Khan Tengri, the Lord of the Sky. And then abruptly, the spell broken, together their horses wheeled ; together they scrambled up through the brush of the slope ; out from the trees they galloped together over the hard cold steppe. Mindless of stars still hanging like sword-tips over their heads they rode ; dashing north on the Saratov Road, leaving the last pin-point of light from Fort Jenat far behind, the hooves of their horses ringing now and then over the ice of broad but shallow tributaries of the Volga River ; north toward the ulus of Ubasha Khan, sweeping past thickly crowded hoshuns where people were already piling their carts and animals for departure at dawn, shouting back at the people—side by side laughing, shouting, into the very face of the wind now blowing cold and direct from the north, they rode.

CHAPTER TWO



The night began to grow colder and the sky more clear until it seemed a sheer precipice of dark shiny ice down which the stars were sliding faster and faster into the west.

Departure had been set for dawn, and there were innumerable things to be done.

The winter camps of the Torgut horde stretched north and south on the Volga more than one hundred miles. In these camps there were four hundred thousand men, women, and children ; and in their winter shelters and corrals there were five million horses, cattle, goats, and sheep.

The Torgut horde—known as the Torgut Banner in the antique Mongolian Order—was composed of thirteen divisions, or uluses, each governed by princely chieftains. Of these, the ulus of Ubasha Khan was by far the largest, being composed of ten aimaks, which were semi-military jurisdictions under elected warriors known as the saissangs. Other large uluses composed of more than one aimak were those of the khan's cousin, Zebek ; of his mother's cousin, the Prince Bambar ; of his brother-in-law, Galdan ; of Donderkov, uncle of the Prince Zebek ; of Zaatun, Buuron, Sapsor, and the Kerats.

The aimaks, in turn, were divided into hoshuns, villages composed of ten or twenty yurts. These yurts, which were the circular felt-covered dwellings of families, were usually grouped into hoshuns by reason of blood and marriage relationships, or servitude. In all the Volga uluses of the

Torgut horde there were more than five thousand hoshuns.

All these hoshuns, spread over an area of nearly one thousand square miles, were now filled with the clamour and bustle of an aroused people.

Yurts and corrals and shelters were being dismantled, and all combustible things which couldn't be taken on a long migration were piled on great fires that sprang into the air for many miles along the east bank of the Volga. The cold of the night grew so intense that even these pillars of flame seemed only like icy spires against the sky, and their smoke like only a red and powdery frost.

It grew so cold that people everywhere, without pausing in what they were doing, began to shout at their neighbours a question that was in all minds :

"What do you think—will the river freeze, will the Derbet uluses get across?"

And on this subject, nearly everyone had a different opinion.

"Yes," they would shout back. Or : "No—it's said that the western uluses prefer to stay." Or here and there someone might have a more rhetorical answer, such as : "In my grandfather's time, there was a Mussulman who bathed in the river every day until it froze. One day, just such as to-day, he bathed—and like the will of God, the ice froze him fast before he could swim ashore !"

But there were other questions, too.

"Here, shall I have to leave behind this fine cart I was building?" Or : "What of my three sick sheep—must I kill them, then?" And there were even those who said, bitterly, "If some people we hear about are taking their yurt-frames along, then why must others of us take only our travelling tents?"

On the whole, however, the people were good-natured in their haste, too much in the first gripping excitement of such a rebellious adventure to argue these details overmuch.

Indeed, the hoshuns were filled with such a frenzy of shouts, baa-ing of sheep, lowing of kine, braying of donkeys, the long sad shuddering cries of the shaggy Bactrian camels, the shrill wails and cries of small children wakening, that the complaints of any malcontent were pretty well lost in the din.

It was into the midst of such clamorous confusion that Subutai rode, after he had escorted Cedar-chab to one of her brother's white felt yurts with an imperial blue-and-white pennon planted before its door. He took leave of her abruptly, wheeling his horse, laughing, shaking his musket in farewell ; for now he felt the rapid slipping away of the night, and he made his way quickly as possible through the busy villages toward his father's aimak.

The aimak of the Saissang Temuru was a moderately large division of the particular ulus of Ubasha Khan, consisting of more than forty hoshuns. In most of these village-like clusters of yurts, Subutai found that the hoshun officers, the shulengas and the demchis, had already achieved some measure of order.

Many of the yurts were dismantled. The lattice-work wall-frames were blazing merrily in great pyres, to the delight of children now wide-eyed with excitement. The long roof-poles had already been sharpened and converted into lances, according to the instructions of Ubasha Khan and the Military Council. And the thick grey felts which had formerly covered the walls and roofs of the yurts were lying about, ready for use in packing the sumpter-animals and the carts.

Subutai's white Bar-Kul mare picked her way gingerly among the fires, children, dogs, and domestic animals, pausing here and there while Subutai tried to answer a thousand questions, to examine the weapons of the men, to confer with the shulengas about food and water supplies and the order of march.

But when he came at last to his brother Gedesu's hoshun,

he found no activity at all—nothing but darkness and silence among the yurts, except for the muttering of several old men who stood near the palings of a corral behind his brother's yurt. One of the men was Khoochin, the father of Ghashun, Subutai's sister-in-law ; and Khoochin, known to Gedesu's dogs, had been able to hold them at a distance while he and his friends consulted.

The dogs came yapping and snapping at Subutai's legs, but he beat them off with his long whip and rode up to the men.

"Well?" he asked.

"We have spoken to Ghashun," said one of the men, "but she refuses to do a single thing on our order."

"Gedesu has not yet returned," another explained.

"Well, then, on my order!" cried Subutai. "Dismantle the yurts—get the animals packed. Get ready, we leave at dawn!"

And without stopping to argue, he rode through the dogs to the door of his brother's yurt. He dismounted, knocked loudly, and then burst in.

His brother's wife, whom he intuitively disliked, had, like his brother, been given another name at birth than the one now in popular use. Just as Gedesu, meaning belly, described his brother to everyone's delight, so did Ghashun, meaning bitter, describe his wife.

Within the yurt, near a small argol fire of dried animal droppings that burned in an iron brazier, she stood thin and bitter and only partially dressed, staring at him.

"Get dressed," he said harshly.

"Get you gone!" she cried angrily. "Who are you, to give orders in your brother's yurt?"

"I am lieutenant-saissang now," he said, unable to keep a certain amount of pride from his voice.

She laughed, making a pretence of further unbuttoning her long red cotton kalat, as though to aggravate him.

"You, little man? And what of your brother?"

Subutai grunted.

"He's too fat ; he thinks of himself only."

"Oh, and you," she said acidly, "you and your fine white horse ! Giving yourself airs like a prince, and all."

Annoyingly, she shook the folds of her kalat open, so that part of her yellowish dry flesh was exposed. Subutai, partly in shame and partly to control his growing anger, turned aside.

"You know very well," he muttered, "that the khan gave me that horse for winning the races two summers ago."

"Oh, I have a very good idea why you got that horse," Ghashun said, with deliberate and illogical malice. "And from whom—and for what sorts of favours and pleasures indeed !"

She was looking at him with such a vengeful bitterness—as though she were about to utter the very name of Cedar-chab in connection with such slander and lies—that he took one swift step toward her and clapped a hand roughly over her mouth.

"You lie !" he said.

But the curious thing was that, instead of struggling, instead of trying to cry out, she seemed to melt against him. Her eyes became soft, her kalat fell wide open, and even through the wool of his long coat it seemed he could feel the heat of her body. Shamed and confused, he drew his hand away from her mouth, and she moaned, whining softly :

"O Subutai ! it's only that I hate her for having your love——"

"Why, but she—but I don't love her—that is to say, I ust——"

Subutai faltered in angry confusion. Ghashun clung to him, seizing quickly on his words.

"Ah, my Subutai, nor does she love you—believe me, a woman ! She plans to use you and cast you aside," she cried,

trembling horribly and trying to reach his lips, moaning, "Am I so ugly, then, now we are here alone?"

All this seemed so frightening to Subutai that he was moved more by terror than shame. Over his face there came a look of such disgust and loathing and fear that he had little need even to shove her slightly aside. For, seeing his face, she recoiled metallically with her eyes bitter and hard again.

"Well! so that's how it is!" she said, her mouth like a thin ugly knife. "Very well then—so be it!"

Subutai stumbled from the yurt and left the door swinging wide in the night. He swung into his saddle, beating sickly at the dogs with his whip. For a moment he was afraid he might be stricken by nausea.

He rode through the hoshun slowly. He saw that the old men, taking his word for command, had roused the people and were beginning to dismantle the yurts. He rode towards his father's hoshun, which was a short distance away.

A rider, coming up suddenly from behind, plucked at his sleeve. It was Bagha—one of the Shamanist conjure-priests, who were accepted by the Buddhist lamas as a lower order of ecclesiastics because of their great popularity among the superstitious masses. Bagha was not dressed ceremonially to-night but, like all other Torguts, wore clothes for hard winter travel. He peered good-naturedly at Subutai and said:

"Well, my boy, what ails you? Spit it out."

Subutai smiled wanly.

"I can't," he said.

The shaman clicked his tongue.

"A woman, I bet."

"Look here, Bagha," Subutai said impulsively, feeling the need for just such a confidant as the shaman. "I like to speak badly of no people—but this I must tell you, because she wishes harm to . . . Well, it's Ghashun, my

brother's wife. Can you prevent her in this?" He looked eagerly at Bagha.

The shaman fingered his chin thoughtfully. He sighed.

"A river may be sweet," he said, "yet when it reaches the sea, it too becomes salt. So it is, with even the good thoughts which an evil or bitter woman may draw from seeing a good man. For they become bitter and evil thoughts, invariably."

He sighed again, dolorously. "This will be difficult, for I shall have to make many remedies, and it will cost much."

Without further question, Subutai reached into the folds of his inner gown where, against his breast, he kept a small pouch. This contained a small horde of roubles which he had saved from the autumn marketing of sheep and goats. He tossed it impulsively to the shaman.

"Ah!" said Bagha, hefting the purse. "This will be sufficient; yes indeed! . . . Although, never fear! I shall have to make many remedies, my boy, to keep harm from *you know whom!*"

With this cryptic remark, he suddenly nudged his horse and dashed away. Subutai frowned, wondering how Bagha knew whom he meant. But time was fleeting; and with the matter in Bagha's hands, Subutai felt relieved and he rode on to his father's hoshun.

Here, all was going well. Even the loading of sumpter-animals was well along; some of the beasts were still surrounded by felt-covered bales and tangled cordage, but others were already laden, with the cordage and girths drawn tight. Two of Temuru's three Bactrian camels which he valued highly, were pawing at the hard ground with their well-wrapped feet, uttering terrible shuddering cries because their calves were gone from sight, having been strapped high atop their completed loads.

The humpback Tenek, chattering like an excited monkey, was running from place to place, from the fires to the

animals and back to the fires again, sweeping his arms in gestures wild as the flames. Although he continually got in the way, people paid him little attention—the superstitious because they feared him, and the enlightened because they had pity.

In a way, at first glance it might appear that all the people were shouting and busying themselves as meaninglessly as Tenek, so confused was the hubbub and welter of people, animals, and carts.

But migration, always somewhat chaotic, was the ordinary condition of life for the Torguts. In the summer, there was the continual shifting of camps and herds over the pasturelands ; and twice a year there was the large-scale movement between the summer and winter camps.

Usually, however, the time of migration was known well in advance ; people prepared for it more leisurely, and often it took several weeks for the last stragglers to get under way. This time, in order to forestall Russian opposition, the decision to migrate had been abrupt ; the departure had to be almost military in precision and speed, to elude pursuit.

The air was full of rumours about where they were going, but one thing was certain—the Tsarina would unquestionably regard their departure as an act of rebellion. And indeed it was. It was this knowledge which marked their midwinter migration as something strikingly different, something historic, no matter what came of it ; and this feeling of profound rebellion gave an added zest, a feverish haste, to their preparation.

So the confusion was more pronounced than usual ; but out of it, as always, the native skill of the Torguts for quick migration was bringing a remarkable order.

The progress already made at Temuru's hoshun pleased Subutai, and for a moment he bantered with several men who were starting to dismantle his father's yurt.

His grandmother was standing in the door.

He dismounted, embarrassed by the way she looked at him.

She opened her toothless mouth, and her old face became wrinkled with a proud smile.

"Now you come truly," she said, "looking more a great hero than even the mighty Subutai of history. When you were born there was a shower of red stars and your mother died. The shaman said, 'This one will be a great hero, a mighty fighter.'"

"Yes, yes, Grandma," he said hastily, ashamed to have the other men hear these things; "I expect the shaman was well paid to discover these things in the stars. After all," he said, pushing her gently before him into the yurt, "I've never fought more than a wolf, so that doesn't make me much of a hero—isn't it so?"

Inside the yurt it was warm and pleasant. He sat down on a mat near the fire, sniffing hungrily at a stew that was simmering in an iron pot. He had been riding most of the day, and had eaten nothing but a few slices of dried milk cut from the slab which he, like all Torgut horsemen, carried with him wherever he went. Now, with a mumble of thanks to Khan Tengri, he reached into the pot and drew out a large piece of meat. Chewing this contentedly, he looked about.

Grandma had already taken most of the little felt house-gods down from the walls. On her side of the yurt, the right-hand side, the familiar felt images of sheep and cattle teats, which were supposed to guarantee the fertility of the animals, were gone; and from his own and his father's side of the circular yurt, the mare's teats were gone.

Still hungry, he dipped into the pot for another piece of meat. Silently, Grandma placed a cup of buttered tea before him.

Most of their personal belongings, he noticed, she had already packed away in the two willow-and-felt chests near the door, on top of which their sleeping mats had been

strapped. But the large chest of a strange dark wood, placed for a house-altar against the wall opposite the door, she had not yet touched.

Swallowing his tea at a gulp and wiping the grease from his hands on his high leather boots—so as to waste none of the fatty value of the mutton—he crossed to this chest which reputedly had come from that very country, Djungaria, where his people had lived long ago and which Cedar-chab had mentioned to-night. The name of that country seemed strange when he thought of it as a place that actually existed somewhere, although he was familiar with the *Djungariade*, the ballad of the old Torgut homeland and heroes. It was curious to think that, if they couldn't return to the Volga in freedom or dwell by the Emba, then he and his people might actually see that distant land before they ended the great migration about to begin. . . . Idly, puzzled by the way some racial memory was stirred when he thought thus of a land he had never seen, he fingered the strange dark wood of the chest.

On top of the chest were, according to custom, a few copper dishes for offerings of food and drink to the gods, and a copper bowl filled with tallow in which a felt wick was burning with a dim blue flame. On one side there was a rare brass image of Buddha, and on the other, the Shamanist god of good luck, Tsa-i-a-gachi. In the centre was a large coloured felt image of Khan Tengri, the highest god of all.

"Grandma?" he said suddenly.

"Yes, Subutai?"

"Is it true, then, this chest came from Djungaria?"

"From Djungaria with my own grandmother," she said, "and from somewhere afar, before that."

"And is Djungaria a fine country, Grandma?"

"The finest, the highest land in the world, my Subutai, all bright and shiny like morning. In the night the white glaciers of ice tinkle like shepherd bells while Khan Tengri

watches over the sleepers. And the valleys are all deep green like jade, and the waters sweet like silver."

"Can there be such a fine land, Grandma?" said Subutai. "And why did our people leave, if this is so?"

"The other side of the hill," said Grandma dryly, "is always greener."

Subutai sighed, then.

"But the chest, Grandma. It's a fine chest," he said. "Shall we take it?"

Grandma hesitated only a moment before she answered:

"There'll be no room on our cart. And I'm sure, other fine chests may be found somewhere."

"We can make room, Grandma, if you say . . ."

"Nonsense, we have enough as it is!" she shouted, pretending to be angry. "And I'd like to know who's letting all the night wind in like a wolf?"

Subutai's neighbours, having released the lashings outside, were dismantling the felts from the roof-poles of the yurt. Just as Grandma spoke, someone clumsily displaced the iron smoke-vent and it came tumbling down on to the brazier. It scattered the blazing argols and might have upset the iron pot except that Grandma, with surprising agility, snatched it out of the way just in time.

She looked up and shouted, now really angry:

"You clumsy donkeys! Get down from there before I—I——"

But she could only sputter toothlessly, unable to think what punishment she might exact. And the neighbour merely wagged his head between the roof-poles and the shiny dark sky and said, grinning sheepishly:

"It fell."

Just then, a man down below set up a shout.

"Here they come!" he cried. "Subutai, it's your father and the rest!"

By this time, Subutai could hear the gallop of horses and the shouting of riders. He burst out of the yurt, cracking his

whip at the dogs, who were gathered and yelping to meet the newcomers. Through the dark swiftly came the Saissang Temuru, followed by several men. Temuru, a burly old fighter with a grey moustache and an air of command, leaped down from his horse and tossed the bridle to one of the men.

"Well?" he grunted.

"All goes well—except at Gedesu's hoshun," said Subutai, seeing his brother bringing up the rear. "It seems that some people's wives think pots full of Russian coppers make them fit to give or withhold orders themselves."

"Quit your babbling," said Temuru. "Are you a child, an old woman?"

Subutai lowered his eyes, justly rebuked by his father. He heard Gedesu snicker and say:

"Yes—and some people who like to pose as the hero, the mighty fighter, had better cut their wisdom-teeth first."

"Silence—both of you!" roared their father, barely pausing in the door of the yurt. "What is this—a conclave of fools and priests?"

Now Subutai raised his head and he felt better to see how Gedesu came up puffing and panting in his saddle. Then he burst into outright laughter, seeing that Gedesu had converted his lance into a Mongol lariat by tying a looped cord to its end.

"Oho!" cried Subutai, shouting with laughter. "So Gedesu's caught a Cossack! . . . Tell me, did you catch him with your lasso, brother, the way you gather copecks for your copper pot?"

"Make way!" Gedesu said darkly, pressing his horse forward. He held the lance gingerly, with the butt resting pompously against a fold in his belly; the lariat was looped like a halter around his captive's neck. "Make way there!" puffed Gedesu.

Subutai's laughter died abruptly, for he saw that Gedesu's captive was his own friend, Vasilov. The Cossack's arms

were folded and bound tightly behind his back, which gave him, despite the ignominious halter around his neck, a proud and arrogant bearing. When Subutai quickly planted himself before the captive's horse, Vasilov winked at his friend without changing his expression of scorn ; and he said in Russian, which Subutai understood somewhat:

"The fat man claimed me, according to the law of the hunt, for having seen me first. The mightiest hunter is not he who makes the kill, it seems, but he of the most vulturous eyes."

Subutai laughed harshly.

"He has the guts of a jackal," he said in Torgut. "You won't come to any harm from him, I'll lay my life."

He cast a warning glance at Gedesu. The latter jerked his lariat so that he nearly toppled Vasilov to the ground ; and nudging his horse past Subutai, he called out :

"As to that, I'll have the say."

"If you do," shouted Subutai, "I'll slit your fat belly like a sheep !"

Gedesu, puffing with outraged dignity, found no answer to make, and jogged on with his captive in tow. Subutai, looking after them, finally heeded his grandmother, who was plucking at his sleeve.

"Subutai," she said softly, "your father is angry, Subutai."

But when he entered the yurt, he found his father in better humour. Temuru rose from the fire, stroking the mutton grease from his fingers on to his grey moustache.

"Have you eaten ? We may not eat for some time," he said gruffly. "We have much to do—no time for such squabbling."

Stroking his moustache, he continued to survey the strong figure of his young son with grudging pride.

"Vasilov is my friend," said Subutai. "Gedesu is a fool."

"There was one time a serpent," said Temuru, somehow

giving new point to the old fable, the way he kept on stroking his upper lip, "and it had many heads. One night during a frost it set out to find shelter. But before it could start, the heads began to argue. It froze to death."

"It's true," Grandma said. "My grandmother told me, somebody saw it happen."

"Anger tortures the mind," Temuru continued, "as the hills distress a horse." It seemed that there was something else of import that he wished to convey to his stalwart son Subutai, and that his gnarled fingers were stroking the grey hairs of memory for the proper and traditional words. "Amongst people in peace," he said finally, "one must be like a calf—small and silent. Only in time of war, like a falcon out hunting, one must go to work shouting."

Suddenly he embraced his son, an unusual thing among their people, and turned quickly away. He went to the great chest and came back holding a leathern flask of arrack.

The neighbours, by this time, had stripped all the felts away from the roof, and were now industriously dismantling the walls. Wind and cold air began to blow in through the lattice frames. It seemed to Subutai that he was standing inside the last shell of his youth, through which he could already see the shiny dark freedom of maturity into which he must pass. Silently, he watched his father.

Temuru tilted the flask and wet his fingers. He sprinkled the liquor first to the south for fire, then to the east for air, to the west for water, and then to the north for the dead. Finally, he poured a little on the ground they were about to leave. He said solemnly, quoting the old Mongol motto :
"A man's path is only one."

Then, having drunk his fill, he handed the flagon to Subutai and went out of the yurt. Swiftly Subutai gulped down the warming liquor, and it seemed to purge all his weariness and anger away. His blood swirled excitedly—all about him, the dying night swirled like a great dark

wind eager for the Torguts to start on their way. With scarcely a look at Grandma, who was scouring the iron pot with some dry grass, Subutai rushed outside.

For just at that moment a thunderous shot rang out. It was one of the brass cannon given the Torguts by the Tsarina to fight the Kirghiz. The shot echoed, in defiance of the Tsarina herself, signifying that barely an hour remained until departure at dawn.

All over the Volga steppes, now, fires began to blaze with a new glitter against the sky. Each of the five thousand hoshuns of the Torgut people was a scene of renewed confusion. Two-wheeled carts were heavy-laden, oxen were already yoked, waiting to move. Beasts of burden milled about, even cattle were being loaded with goods by people who owned no carts. Shulengas of the hoshuns were working frantically to array the furniture carts, the water carts, the high covered travel carts—all seemingly a hopeless tangle of locked wheels—in their proper order. And from five thousand hoshuns rose the bray and bellow of pack animals, the clamour of sheep, the fierce barking of dogs, the shouts and cries of the people, all impatient to be gone.

Vaguely out across the easterly slope of the steppes, the crusted snow of a previous fall could be seen to glitter like pale silver under the cold high stars. And more and more, now, as the long night came to its end, the people began to strain their eyes eastward for the new day's dawn.

CHAPTER THREE



A little before dawn the wind died suddenly. The people, the animals, even the dogs and children seemed enchanted with some universal stillness. They stood motionless on the dark and frozen steppe, all facing the east. Smoke from the dying fires rose like incense toward the silvery light of dawn in the higher air. There was a strongly spiritual quality to this moment, which all the vast assemblage seemed to feel—almost as though in turning their backs to the night they were, metaphorically, turning away from the modern world, over which historical changes were gathered dark as storm or night, and which the pastoral Torguts could neither understand nor endure. And it seemed as though, holding their faces hopefully toward the dawn, they were facing the path back to that bright freedom recalled somehow from the morning of time.

So it was that all, tensely, watched the snow lose its dark glitter and begin to swell like a foamy sea, a cloud, a pure white world over which the sun in a moment would burst. Involuntarily, all seemed to hold even breath in abeyance while the cold white light turned crimson. And then, like a thin wind rushing across the snow, a vast sigh of release swept over them all.

For the Buddhist priests, the lamas in all the aimaks, struck their Chinese gongs and beat their brass cymbals, intoning the morning mantra, chanting thinly above the holy din :

“ It has arisen, it has arisen !
The sun of happiness has arisen !
O Maricinam Svaha !
We salute you, O Goddess Marici !
Bless us, and fulfil our desires.
Protect us, O goddess,
from all the eight fears—
of foes, robbers, wild beasts,
snakes and poisons, weapons,
fire, water,
and high precipices.”

And now, with the sun balanced like a great translucent drop of blood on the white horizon, the second brass cannon fired its metal ball bravely into, it seemed, the very heart of the morning sun. And suddenly—braying, bleating, creaking—the whole vast assemblage burst the enchantment of dawn. Over an area of one thousand square miles, over a front of more than one hundred miles, the Torgut migration surged forward.

Subutai sat on his white horse in the midst of his grandmother's cattle and sheep, waiting the turn of his father's aimak to move. Temuru had gone ahead with the warriors, whom Subutai was to join when the aimak got under way. He glanced at the orderly hoshuns, all ready to move into line ; and then he looked toward the central aimak of Ubasha Khan, which was still passing into position ahead.

The people of the court were at a considerable distance, and Subutai strained in his saddle to see. The ladies were clad in their fine red gowns, puffed at the shoulders and girdled with silver-and-ruby belts, under their heavy furs ; under their warm gloves, he knew, their nails were festally lacquered with red ; and on their faces a dark rouge, protection against wind and sun-glare and driven snow, was smeared. He could see Mandere, the wife of Ubasha, reputedly heavy with child, in a pannier on the side of a camel ; on the far side her two small children probably rode. Behind were Sand-chab, elder sister to Ubasha, and

the Lama Loosang, chief priest of the Torgut people. Subutai rose impatiently in his stirrups, peering over the host of people and animals and carts, looking for Cedar-chab. Ah, there she was ! her face glowing and gay under her fur cap—turning toward him, it seemed, smiling and waving ! Subutai flushed deeply, raising his silver-mounted musket in greeting ; and then, losing sight of her, he sank back.

Now it was almost time for Temuru's aimak to move into line. Subutai wheeled his horse, seeing Grandma perched on her cart, which Tenek, who seemed the only person on foot, was admiring with extravagant gestures.

"Look here, Grandma," said Subutai, riding up through the sheep which were being herded by some of the neighbours' children, "can you manage all right ?"

"I'm not too old to be able," she said.

Subutai pointed to Tenek.

"I mean," he said, "why not let Tenek help ? . . . Besides, he has nowhere to ride."

Tenek babbled something, looking ecstatically at Grandma's cart.

Just at that moment some sheep ran past, driven in panic by a careless rider.

"Eh, Tenek ?" said Grandma. "What did you say ?"

"Out of a fool's mouth, nothing," said Gedesu, coming up puffing. He was flustered and sweating. Everything since dawn seemed to have been going wrong—sheep wouldn't stay put, he'd had no breakfast, and when could a man ever rest ? He mopped his forehead and shouted, "Hey, Tenek, you fool—after the sheep ! Stop them ! . . . I'll take care of Grandma," he said to Subutai.

Subutai saw that Gedesu had a new musket strapped to his back, and he smiled broadly.

"Well, well !" he said. "So you're going to be a fighter, perhaps."

"Somebody has to stay with the animals and goods, and protect the women," said Gedesu, reddening.

"And may I ask, where did you get the musket?" said Subutai.

"None of your business," retorted Gedesu, growing redder. "I gave good money for it, if that's what you mean."

But now, whether the sheep had been thrown into a new panic by the whirling antics of Tenek, who was trying to herd them, or whether the original disturbance had merely spread among the closely massed animals, a cart came crashing and lurching over the hard ground and stopped with its wheel caught against that of Grandma's cart.

Whirling around angrily, rather swiftly for a fat man, Gedesu saw that it was his own cart, driven by Ghashun, with Vasilov, whose arms were still bound behind him, propped on the seat at her side. Wanting to vent his morning spleen on someone, Gedesu raised his whip, about to lash the helpless Cossack, shouting :

"So it was you, was it? Trying to escape, were you, by stampeding my stock?"

Subutai, who was beginning to grow angry, seized Gedesu's arm and spun him around. Reluctantly, his face a deep red now, Gedesu lowered his whip and, with a sullen look at Subutai, rode off to examine the trouble, muttering all the while. In the meantime, Tenek, babbling excitedly, was trying to get his deformed back under the axle and heave the wheel free. He grunted and grinned up at Gedesu. To Gedesu, now, the infuriating nature of the whole series of misfortunes, which had been piling up on him since dawn, seemed attributable to the grinning fool Tenek; and he began to lash viciously at the man with his whip. Subutai, hearing the shrieks of the hunchback, dashed up.

When he saw what was doing, Subutai lost his temper completely—his own whip curled like a snake around

Gedesu's flabby cheeks, and it flicked, with its sharp tail, one of his brother's eyes from its socket.

Now Gedesu screamed, almost falling from his horse among the bleating sheep, while Tenek lay whimpering and twisting about on the ground beneath the cart. Grandma came hobbling to see what was the matter, and Gedesu's wife. Ghashun, at first, burst into cruel laughter at the sight of her husband, bellowing like a skewered sheep and holding the tenuous gelatine of his eye in the palm of his hand; but then, calculating what the loss of an eye was worth, she began shouting at Subutai. Subutai, stricken with a sick remorse, was trying to say or do something compassionate for his brother. But Gedesu, staring with his good eye at the bleeding pulp in his hand, suddenly stopped shrieking and said in a clear loud voice :

"For the loss of an eye, my violent brother—nine horses, or one hundred sheep ! . . . And ninety-nine won't do, isn't it so ?"

He wrenched the filaments of his eye out at their roots, and held them dangling aloft, like a merchant at a bazaar, for all to see, turning his good eye this way and that to encompass all the beholders who craned their necks his way.

"One hundred sheep !" he shouted triumphantly.

"Take all of them," Subutai said wretchedly, ashamed of himself and of his brother's greed. "Take all my sheep, all."

"Subutai !" cried Grandma.

But Subutai, unable to bear such haggling, had nudged his horse and dashed off. Grandma turned angrily to Gedesu and said :

"Stop bellowing, you sad specimen of a meddler, and listen ! One hundred sheep shall you get, and not one more. Take yourself off—Tenek shall drive with me, as Subutai said."

And drawing the hunchback from beneath the cart, she returned to her place.

Subutai, up ahead, had given the signal ; and now the

aimak of Temuru began slowly to move and take its place in the ponderous horde. Subutai began working his way toward the vanguard of fighters.

Recalling what had happened so vividly that his own eye quivered in pain, he wondered how it could be that two men of the same people, brothers such as Gedesu and himself, could hate one another so bitterly. Perhaps it was largely his own fault, since many times he had bantered cruelly at his brother's expense. Yet then, why should this be so? Was it not, truly, because in some way he felt Gedesu's nature was not that of a Torgut freeman? Rather it seemed that his brother was typical of a curious slavery which had already begun to corrupt his people—a slavery to the copper copeck, to the soft sleek manners of a merchant. For whereas most men thought of sheep as a means of existence, men like Gedesu regarded them as the sum total of their existence, acquiring larger and larger herds by all manner of sly means. Yes, thought Subutai, it was good that his people were departing these Russian steppes, perhaps barely in time.

He was riding slowly, partly because of the difficulty in working his way among the close-packed carts and herds, and partly because of his mood. He paid scant attention to those who called his name, and none to the chatter and gossip rising all about him like foam in the morning sun from the great tidal wave of migration now rolling steadily east.

"Hey, where are we going, anyhow?" called one.

"Where the grass is green," said another, "and where there are no forts."

"What? are there no forts on the Emba?"

"Only on the Jaik."

"Ah! Will they try to stop us there?"

"Perhaps—ask someone who knows. . . . Hey there, Subutai!"

But Subutai pressed on more rapidly, moving north

through the crowd toward a low ridge which promised greater ease of movement apart from the horde. "Can they stop us?" he thought. "Certainly they will try. . . . They surround us with forts, they make us fight their wars, they take wool and animals every year, they make us buy their goods." Why, Subutai could remember, when he was a young boy, his people made many of the things for themselves that now they bought. All things men had said yesterday at the great meeting were true, for nowadays the Torguts had many more sheep than ever before, yet they seemed poorer, somehow, each year. It was as though the Tsarina were slowly devouring his people. And now they were fleeing from her greedy maw—but soon she would wake and snap at their heels.

He felt a clear cold wind blowing in his face like a challenge to battle, when he reached the ridge. Snow was drifted deep at its foot, and his horse floundered a moment but then broke vigorously through, scrambling up the frosted rocks. Seated firmly, holding bridle in one hand and whip in the other, with his new musket strapped to his back, Subutai mounted the ridge.

From here he could see far to the south and far to the north across the snow-covered steppe. And farther than he could see, the horde stretched to the horizon and beyond. From far behind, too, the hoshuns were coming. And over the whole scene hung the churned-up snow, obscuring the brilliant sun a little, like a fine white steam rising from the vast breath of the moving horde.

The hoshuns were progressing in good order, according to custom, with the pony herds first to trample the snow. Then came the cattle and laden oxen, followed by camels tethered in single file. The sheep and goats moved after them like restless snowdrifts, shepherded by camp dogs, and by girls and boys laughing and shouting on shaggy ponies that doubled back and forth quickly as dogs. Then came greyhounds, held in leash by old men ; and hooded berkuts

were clutching the bony wrists of other old men, who were able to support the great weight of the hunting eagles only by resting their wrists on wooden crutches built from their stirrups. Next came the oxen, hauling the great two-wheeled carts, some of which were built in the modern style with solid round wheels. As a matter of fact, the octagon carts had much the best of it over such snow as this, for the round wheels often slithered and spun and bothered the plodding oxen. Occasionally the great carts rocked violently ; but they rarely toppled, for the women and herdsman who drove them were skilled in guiding the oxen and keeping their loads in balance. And finally, bringing up the rear of each hoshun, came old women and children on foot, whose task was to gather the droppings of animals which they tossed into the argol carts for fuel.

Hoshun after hoshun they came—pony herds ; cattle and pack animals ; sheep and goats herded by dogs and youngsters ; old men with eagles and greyhounds ; women and men on horseback, or driving the oxen who hauled the lumbering carts ; household carts piled high ; great round water carts filled for the present with an overflow of household goods ; white temple carts ; fodder carts filled with grass and grain for the beasts ; and the argol carts followed by old women and children—repeating this pattern, of animals and people and carts, the Torgut horde, hoshun by hoshun, aimak by aimak, ulus by ulus, endlessly, it seemed, was moving now in a mighty tide toward the east.

Subutai, riding along the ridge, could see now and then a hoshun, sometimes a whole aimak, cease to move, drift on slowly, stop again, and then surge forward with new speed—like blocks of ice in the spring floods, like vast currents and cross-currents in a river broad as a tidal wave, mighty as a glacier, bound rapidly toward the east.

Far to the south, nearly forty miles away, forming the right flank of the horde, were the uluses of Zebek and his brothers Kirep and Aksakal ; of Assarko, Mashi, Yandit,

and the Zaatun ulus ; and these were all under the military command of the Prince Zebek, President of the Torgut Council, cousin of the khan.

Under the Prince Chereng of the far north, forming the left flank, were the great uluses of the Buurun and the Kerats.

In the rear, bringing up the horde, were the uluses of Bambar, Sapsor, and the lesser uluses of Koktshinar and Khandur, commanded by the Prince Bambar.

And forming the centre of the Torgut horde, stretching distantly ahead to the east, was the vast ulus of Ubasha Khan, together with that of his father-in-law Erranpal, of the Tukchi, of Merghon and Samiang, of Guiji Baljur, and the small ulus of renegade Bashkirs and Turkomans, all with Ubasha Khan in command.

On the flanks of the horde, and in the rear, were strong detachments of fighting men ; and in the vanguard many miles ahead there were ten thousand of the best Torgut warriors, commanded by Temuru and his old friend Momotubash, Ubasha's saissang-generals, veterans of countless battles with savage hordes, grim heroes of the recent Russo-Turkish War.

Of the great Torgut Banner only the Derbet uluses of Prince Donderkov and Prince Galdan, unable or unwilling to cross the Volga, were left behind.

As the vast trains of carts and animals lengthened out, they began forming into three great main columns, each column composed, in turn, of innumerable streams of hoshuns and aimaks. The centre column, led by Ubasha and brought up in the rear by Bambar, stretched nearly fifty miles from head to tail ; and it covered a broad spread of more than twenty miles, although its long skeins of hoshuns and aimaks would perhaps draw together, finally, into a front of ten or twelve miles. The left and right wings of the horde—the flanking columns of Chereng and Zebek—were separated from the centre by military corridors

several miles in width. Each of these columns—composed, like the main columns, of many skeins of hoshuns and aimaks—would eventually take shape nearly as long and two-thirds as broad as the great centre column. Over an area of land more than fifty miles broad and forty miles long, the Torguts were shaping into three vast armies of migrating animals, carts, and people.

It was a stirring sight to Subutai.

He had never seen the whole Volga horde moving thus, compact and yet covering the land farther than eye could see. Nor in all the history of his people could he recall legends or stories in which so many people, with their whole herds and goods, had travelled at one time toward some distant and unknown goal.

Truly, there were close to four hundred thousand people, twice as many ponies and horses, and nearly five million cattle and sheep and goats and oxen, and more than one hundred thousand dogs.

His heart thrilled, seeing this—seeing the pennons of Ubasha Khan far ahead, among the vanguard of fighters, the Torgut standards like white-and-blue patches of mist—and he nudged his horse faster ahead.

Where the ridge ended, there was a clear space of beaten snow—and only the vanguard several miles beyond. His sturdy horse raced down the slope and out on the snow. Underfoot blue chips of ice sprang up with the snow, for here began the wide salt marshes which would have been impossible to cross at any time other than midwinter ; and the beat of his horse's hooves rang with muffled strokes on the gong of ice. Into the ranks of the military men he dashed, shouting :

“ Ya-bonnah ! ”

Men greeted him, and some were singing, and all were watching keenly ahead over the glittering snow for signs of trouble, for landmarks, for the mere joy of facing the bright new morning at the head of their people. As they

rode, some of them sang with a melancholy denied by their eyes :

“ O, my horse was born
behind yon grassy hill.
The soldiers of the Tsarina
have looked with envy on my horse.
The colour of my horse's hair
was beautiful as sky and cloud.
When my horse ran,
A cloud of dust was left behind.
He was tall and his hair was blue.
O ! where can my horse have gone ? ”

Subutai joined in the singing with exuberant melancholy, and when they ended he laughed wildly with the others, scorning the Tsarina's thieves from whom they were fleeing, ecstatic and almost drunk with freedom and with the clear blue sky, ahead and above, and with the clean white snow. And then somebody shouted and struck up a song of war, which people said had come all the way down from the time of Temudjin, the great Khan Genghis, singing :

“ What a delight, what glory and delight,
to conquer and kill our enemies !
to make their servants yell !
to seize their wealth and wives !
to make the bellies of their wives
our victory bed ! ”

Thus many of the young men sang, like Subutai, hot and eager now for battle and victory in leading their people. But there were others among them, older men, who merely smiled with vague pleasure at the singing.

It was well enough for the young men to express their vigour with singing. But it was also well to recall that the Torgut people travelled seeking freedom and peace, not plunder and war—and that behind them, on all sides, lurking ever ahead, were the mighty forces of the Tsarina. These considerations sobered the older men, like Temuru and

Momotubash, who saw in the very clarity of the snow and sky only a trick to lull their caution with brilliant bangles of white and blue.

But among all the men, elation and hope now rose, released like fountains of youthful laughter after the long oppression ; and the singing, the exuberant forward surge of the vanguard, like the epicentre of a sparkling high-pressure area drawing in its wake the compact winds, drew after itself the whole freedom-and-joy-drunk horde of the Volga Torguts, sweeping out of Russia and east across snow and ice toward the clear free lands of the morning.

CHAPTER FOUR



The sun crossed its winter meridian and fell slowly away in the south-west, burning like a distant fire, colouring the smoky snow that hung in the evening air. There was little wind, so that the snow-dust floated over the steppe like grass-smoke ; but the air was cold, and became still more bitterly cold as twilight came like a swift shadow from the east. Far away on the flanks of the horde, lean grey timber wolves came, too, slinking from covert and lair to howl nauseously at the cold stars and the taunting odour of flesh.

Rich folks drew on their outer fur cloaks of badger and mink ; and the poor folks, shivering in their goatskin coats, kept close to their animals for warmth.

The old men and old women, unused to a full day spent in the winter air, felt the evening cold most of all. And the children began to fret more than during the day, crying for food and rest. Nothing but dried milk, dissolved in water, had been eaten through the day. The night promised little better—some boiled snow flavoured with brick-tea, perhaps, and a handful of millet to give it substance.

The exuberant joy which had sustained the people throughout the day—amazed to find that they had launched their migration successfully in spite of the Volga forts—by nightfall had given way to the sober knowledge that, travelling thus in the dead of winter by forced marches, they would only make good their escape, if at all, by hardship and suffering.

Few travelling tents were stretched that night when, long after dark, the halt was made. During the day the migrating horde had shaped itself into three main columns, each ten or fifteen miles wide and forty miles long. But as dusk came, the aimaks and uluses drew closer together; and when Ubasha Khan ordered a halt at last and the leading aimaks of each column ceased moving, still the rear hoshuns kept pressing forward until the horde was massed as closely as possible, except for the military corridors left open between the aimaks.

Here on the salt marsh there was no forage for the animals under the snow. Fodder from the provision carts was distributed sparingly among the weary and densely herded beasts. Under the travelling carts, women built small fires, little more than to boil snow—for here there were no trees, not even saxaul bushes, only a small ration of argols to burn. There was no singing, little sound, for all were weary; soon the Torgut host was only a slumbering shadow, spread mightily over the frozen marsh.

The snow in the air, at first drifting under the stars, soon settled like frost on carts and animals and people alike. For many miles along the far borders of the horde, warriors, keeping guard against wolves or sudden attack, rode in silent watch.

Subutai, who had had no sleep the night before, had grown weary during the afternoon and numb with fatigue after dark. But it had been decided that the younger men should keep first vigil, until midnight. Having posted his father's men in a long line out ahead of the horde, Subutai sought the old warrior to make his report, buttoning his sheepskin coat closely under his cold chin, chilling his fingers on the Russian ten-copeck pieces that he wore for buttons. He rode toward a small fire where Temuru, several other elderly commanders, and Ubasha Khan were seated on skins, puffing their pipes before turning in. Subutai could scarcely make out their features in the firelight, except

to see that Ubasha's eyes, above the glow of his pipe-bowl, were turned quizzically in his direction.

"The men are all out," Subutai said self-consciously.

"Enough," Temuru said roughly. "Need you disturb us merely to say what's obvious?"

Subutai flushed and wheeled his white horse.

But Ubasha, stroking his silky moustaches, said pleasantly :

"Isn't that one of my stud?"

"You gave it to him," Temuru growled. "My son Subutai," he said, concealing his pride under a tone of scorn.

"Oh, but I remember quite well!" said Ubasha in a kindly way, as though to make amends for Temuru's gruffness. "Two years ago at the summer races—or could it be three? Yes," he said, chuckling, "he was so pleased with the gift that to show his thanks—like the young stallion he is, mind you—he bit my finger!"

They all laughed deeply, contentedly, and Subutai flushed again, glad it was dark so none could see; he wondered, that two or three years ago he could have done such a childish thing.

"Look you, Subutai," then said Ubasha, putting an end to the laughter. "Go to my aimak and seek the Lama Loosang. Learn from him whether the stars will shine all night, and whether the days still promise to be clear and cold."

"And mind you don't look for some hot arrack to make you groggy," Temuru said gruffly.

"Nor some filly to make you hot," said Momotubash.

They all laughed again deeply, contentedly.

"And see all is well there," called Ubasha.

Subutai wheeled again and rode off, wondering at the gruffness of his father and the kindliness of the khan. His horse sped ahead, dashing down the narrow corridors left open according to military order between the sleeping aimaks. The dark night air, the silence, after the glare and

clamour of day, made it seem somehow exhilarating to be one of the few people awake. Subutai galloped excitedly the whole five miles through the horde to the khan's aimak. Only when he approached his goal did he slow his horse to a walk, and only then did he make his expression impassive and cold.

"The Lama Loosang?" he said quietly to a guard.

"He's turned in. Not to be disturbed."

"From Ubasha Khan," Subutai said impatiently, but keeping his voice low, mindful of the slumbering camp.

"Well, then, it's beyond me," the guard said. "Somewhere near the temple carts. Yonder there—beyond."

"And here?" said Subutai. "Is all well?"

"All," said the man, with a weary gesture.

Subutai's keen eyes were roving among the tethered animals. He was unable to locate Cedar-chab's horse.

"But the Princess Cedar-chab?"

"Gone somewhere," the guard said vaguely.

"Alone?"

"What's it to you, man? Get along now."

Subutai leaned over and said harshly, close to the man's ear:

"From Ubasha Khan!"

The guard's face became inscrutable.

"Alone," he said.

Subutai moved on, letting his horse find a passage among the baggage and animals. Sleepers under a cart muttered irritably. Cattle followed him with their bland eyes, chewing snow noisily. Odours of human and animal excretions rose in thin drifts through the cold air. People coughed here and there, animals stirred restlessly.

Subutai wondered, unhappily, where Cedar-chab could have gone, alone in the night.

He passed the great white-covered temple carts, filled with all the precious vessels and silks and paraphernalia for the chief temple tents, and came finally to a snug shelter

of white furs pitched in the dark. He hesitated, and then coughed slightly and whispered :

“ Your holiness ! ”

He listened attentively. It seemed he could hear a muffled feminine laughter, like Cedar-chab's. His heart beat violently. Then he heard the laughter again, throatier, more mature than Cedar-chab's, and he knew it was Sand-chab, her sister, there in the tent. He whispered more distinctly :

“ *Your holiness !* ”

There was a rustling of silk and then a hand, covered with gleaming stones and holding a rosary made from coral, with turquoise counters, drew open a small fold in the furs ; and the shrewd dark-lidded eyes of the Lama Loosang, elder son of Prince Bambar, peered out.

“ I am busy invoking the aid of Padma Sambhava,” he said in a distant sing-song voice. “ Why am I thus disturbed ? ”

“ The Khan Ubasha,” Subutai faltered. “ He wishes to know, will the stars shine through the night, will the days remain clear and cold ? ”

The fingers holding the beads moved as though counting off the seconds of silence. Then Loosang spoke again, icily :

“ Seek out the shaman, Bagha the Bon-pa priest. He will know more of these earthly matters than I.”

Subutai stared at the fingers and gleaming beads slowly withdrawn like claws through the white furs, aware that he had made an enemy somehow of the powerful chief lama of the Torguts, and he turned away.

It was true, then, he thought, what people said of Cedar-chab's sister. Might it not likely be true, also, of herself ? He tried to stifle this thought by recalling her eyes, her words. Yet among their people, morality had little meaning for those who were married ; and among those unmarried it was largely a matter of paying the price—and the kalim-

price asked by Ubasha for Cedar-chab might well be so high that few men could pay. Only a few of the rich princes, perhaps not even Zebek, could meet such a price. Surely a young warrior like Subutai, with only a white horse and no wealth, could never possess Cedar-chab in a lawful way. Without kalim, then, she might lie like her sister Sand-chab, with fickle laughter in some fur-covered tent. These things Subutai thought, in spite of his knowledge that Cedar-chab would lie only where she willed and loved, without sin.

Tormenting himself with such jealous conjectures, Subutai rode, whipping his way through a pack of dogs who sniffed nauseously at some offal crushed in the snow,

Somebody hissed at Subutai :

"Sh ! take it easy !"

It was Bagha, peering out from under a cart. He motioned for Subutai to dismount. Subutai, aware of the heavy stiff feeling of fatigue in his legs, was glad to stand on the ground and stretch. Beneath the cart, Bagha was tending a little fire. In the coals of the fire lay the shoulder-joint of a sheep.

"Soon I'll be able to tell," he whispered eagerly, "what sort of weather we have in store."

"Good," said Subutai, disinterestedly. "The Lama Loosang was too busy to say."

"Ah," muttered Bagha, "what can he tell, anyway? He wastes time—and only when the spirit moves him, too—with those silly globes and glasses. Listen—I say, don't look at the stars, the sky—look where the weather is. In the bones !"

He prodded the fire, careful not to disturb the shoulder-joint.

"And what was his holiness busy about?" he said.

"Padma Sambhava," said Subutai. "He had the Red-Hat rosary in his hand."

"You see?" hissed Bagha. "There's the fine Yellow-Hat priest for you. Scratch one and you'll find them all

the same. Lechery and blood, like all the rest of us—lechery and blood. . . . Now, take Padma—*there* was a god for you, before these holy-poly Yellow-Hats got the upper hand ! The Red-Hat days were more to our Mongol taste, that's a fact. . . . You know what Padma Sambhava could do ? ”

“ Well, go ahead—what ? ” said Subutai wearily.

Bagha threw back his thin face and closed his eyes, chanting :

“ Visit the fairy world,
travel invisibly as the wind,
soar in the sky,
kill his enemies by sign,
convert corpses into gold,
enslave demons and nymphs,
catch flying birds,
sit cross-legged in the air——”

But at this point the bone cracked suddenly, making a brittle movement among the red coals, interrupting Bagha's litany. He leaned closely over the fire, drawing Subutai down with him, pointing eagerly to the smoky fissure in the joint. He traced the fracture in the bone, saying :

“ There, the gods speak ! Not even Padma could tell you that. Look, ten days or more, perhaps eleven—good clear days, cold ! I tell you what, Subutai—you have to go all the way back to the Shaman gods when you want real information. Take a look and tell me the time—I've got a crick in my neck.”

Subutai looked up at the stars.

“ Less than two hours till midnight,” he said. He mounted his horse, but then he hesitated and leaned down. “ Bagha ? ” he whispered.

Bagha was stretching his cramped limbs, and he said irritably :

“ What now ? . . . You know, I'd think Ubasha might have sent me a coin, or at least a pinch of tobacco, perhaps.”

"Here, take some of mine," said Subutai, pulling a pouch from the breast of his kalat. "It's not his fault, Bagha—I was sent to the Lama Loosang, and it's he who sent me to you."

"I know, I know," Bagha said dejectedly, cramming as much tobacco in his pipe as the bowl would hold. "But doesn't it make a man sick? Whenever there's any real work to be done, everyone comes to me. But who is it lives like a prince and wears the white furs? And they have the gall, mind you, to sneer at the Shaman gods, after they've got what they want. . . . What's the use, is what I say."

"Bagha," said Subutai, suddenly whispering. "You know what we were talking about?—you're making the remedies?"

The shaman nodded.

"A certain party," he said. "She'll come to no harm, from *that* one!"

Subutai, who ought to have felt relieved, felt a chill of alarm. He leaned down and seized his friend by the coat.

"What do you mean, Bagha?" he said sharply. "From someone else, then? Speak up, man," he said, shaking the shaman. "What have you learned?"

"Look out, you're choking me!" sputtered Bagha, breaking free. He stood with his back against his little cart resuming his dignity. "That's a fine way to treat a wizard," he said.

"I'm sorry, Bagha," Subutai said, still alarmed, "but I must know!"

The shaman closed his eyes and turned his face to the black cold sky.

"No harm," he said, "except from herself."

Subutai stared at him in dismay.

"How, from herself?" he faltered. "Is there no remedy?"

The shaman opened his eyes and said irritably :

"How can I tell, man? It's too far to see—too soon——"

He turned and poked at the coals with his boot, scattering them in the snow. They hissed, and steam rose in a cloud from under the cart. The shaman stood in the midst of the thinning steam, looking forlorn and dejected, as though he were, perhaps, only a man like others, unable to help in shaping the future—as though all of them were only leaves in a wind, in a wind that blew according to no law of god or man, but as it willed. . . .

Silently, then, Subutai nudged his horse and returned to the warriors' fire, where he found Temuru and the others sleeping on skins in the snow.

Time enough when they woke, he thought, to tell them the weather.

He rode on, passing the line of picketed horses, to the dark plain beyond. He felt cold and lonely, and was glad to find one of the men. It was Norbo, one of Gedesu's herdsmen now turned fighter—someone to make talk with over a smoke. He drew out his pipe and tobacco, and struck a spark from the fire-striker that hung from his belt. The two horses nuzzled together, and the men talked in low voices.

"How goes it?"

"Nothing much," Norbo said, puffing at his pipe. "A time back, some wolves broke through—killed a few sheep. Down the line. Five—oh, say seven miles from here. You could barely hear the shooting."

"Did they get the wolves?"

"They tell me no."

"Perhaps we'll have hunting in a few days."

"That's true," said Norbo.

After a while, Subutai said :

"You like this better?"

"Than herding?" said Norbo scornfully. "For that fat brother of yours? . . . I'd be a fool not to," he said.

"Perhaps you can get a herd of your own," said Subutai.
"We might have luck on the way—you know?"

"Well," said Norbo thoughtfully, "it's like this. I had a herd, a fine herd of sheep. And then what happened? One day my horse goes lame and I borrow one of Gedesu's. . . . It's true, your brother wasn't about, but it was borrowing just the same——"

He paused; they both looked up to watch a meteor move in a long slow arc through the sky; and then he went on.

"Well, Gedesu hails me to court. What could I do? They say that Gedesu used a few roubles—well-spent, if you ask me—and that's why he was awarded my herd. . . . Why should I get more sheep, isn't it so? It'd be the same thing over again. The rich get richer!" he said bitterly, swinging his arms about to keep warm in his goatskin coat.

"I don't know," Subutai said; "perhaps wherever we're going, things will be different. Perhaps things will be like they were in the old days."

"If you ask me," said Norbo cynically, "never! How can yesterday be to-morrow—isn't it so?"

Subutai said:

"Well, I'll be moving along. . . . Nothing more?"

"Oh, yes," Norbo said, smiling as though recalling one small pleasure in a forlorn night; "the Princess came riding along the line."

Subutai tried to sound casual.

"Cedar-chab? What did she want?"

"Oh, she wanted someone to take a message."

"Anyone special?"

"Why, no—at least, I don't think so. Anyhow, she decided not to send the message, after all."

"Message to where? Did she say?"

"Why, to the Prince Zebek, I think—over on the right flank."

"Oh," said Subutai. "And then——"

"Then," said Norbo, grinning, "she didn't stay to keep me warm—she went home."

Subutai rode away, over the clean unbroken snow. How could a man tell what a girl like Cedar-chab meant? Perhaps she had come here to find him. But what did she want with Zebek? She said one thing, it seemed, and then she did something else. Perhaps this was what Bagha meant—that she was heartless and fickle, and so might bring harm to herself. But let Zebek or anyone harm her! thought Subutai, clutching his whip fiercely. . . . Yet what right, what hope had he, Subutai, with only a white horse and the name of an ancient hero?

Subutai looked up at the black sky and the stars. Was the future unknown to the stars?

The shaman could tell the weather from a bone, he could even tell that certain things were remedied. But could he tell nothing more? The lamas could tell much from the stars; they could tell that this was the end of the Year of the Hare, and that soon the Year of the Tiger would come. It was even rumoured that the Dalai Lama—far away in the Holy Land, Tibet—had predicted these years; and that he had sent a messenger to the Torguts with the answer, that if they planned a rebellious migration from Russia it should come at the juncture of these two years, when they might have the speed of the hare and the strength of the tiger.

It seemed strange that the lamas and shamans could tell such things, and yet not know, truly, the future. They could neither tell what was still unknown for Cedar-chab, Subutai thought despairingly, nor what was in store for his people. Was it known nowhere? . . .

The sky was black, the stars blinked frighteningly—as though it were of no matter whatever to them what came of the small creatures, not even the vast unhappy mass of them, lost in sleep on the snow-covered marsh where the wind blew as it willed.

Subutai, chilled by this thought, rebelled. If this was how

things were, then men would long since have died where they stood, with neither help nor hope. But men still lived, still moved.

"A man's path," he said slowly, "is only one."

Why, he thought suddenly, that meant the path to freedom! On such a path, man could move. No matter if the future were known nowhere—the future could be as man willed. On such a path, obstacles could be circled or destroyed. Then it was good, to live—and in all man's acts, when they came, a man could judge them by the path he trod, and make them yield to his will, knowing a goal of freedom.

Subutai squared his shoulders and breathed the cold air deeply, looking sturdily up at the stars that had seemed so fearsomely dark before. Now they glowed bright, like beacons in the dark night, for it seemed that he and his people had an idea like a guiding star in whose light they could judge all things in their turn, and he felt content.

The midnight finally came, and Temuru, refreshed by sleep, appeared. He listened to Subutai's report of the wolves, and of what Bagha the shaman had said the weather would be. Then he gripped his son's shoulder with a kindly hand and said:

"Good. Sleep well, man. We move again before dawn."

It seemed long before dawn, however, when horns were blown, sonorous as the horns of battle; and the drums were beaten, wild as hooves on the hollow rock. Only a few fires were still burning on the great dark marsh. The sentry line came in from its watch, and messengers dashed from the vanguard back among the hoshuns and aimaks. A deep tumult rose from the people and beasts, waking from their cold and uneasy sleep. Flares were lit, revealing vast masses of rousing heads.

All were roused, save a few of the old men and women who seemed to sleep on like stone. There was a brief wailing of sorrow, a ritual for the god of death. And then,

ceremonially, clothes were taken from the dead, delicately, save where they were frozen to flesh and had to be torn away.

When the carts and animals began moving slowly in the dark, they passed widely as possible around these motionless bodies on the snow. The horde moved onward, steadily, and the air began turning faintly to blue. In the dim light before dawn, the night's dead, left behind on the trampled marsh, were naked and cold as stone. Now from a distance came the wolves—blue, too, like shadows between night and day. And faster, now as though fleeing death in the dawn, the horde moved on.

CHAPTER FIVE



The weather, magically as though to justify the wizard's word, held cold and clear. These were excellent days for travel. Probably under no other conditions at all could the great salt marsh have been crossed. But good progress was made over the packed snow. Although each day's march was limited by the slowest animals, the plodding oxen, still by starting before dawn and halting long after dark, nearly forty miles were travelled each day. Soon the slopes of Mount Chapchi were left behind, north of the frozen marsh ; and south of the marsh, too, the windswept ice-fields of Lake Bish-Uba were glinting ever more distant and dim in the winter haze. Late on the third day, even the white wastes of the marsh were left behind.

Back on the snowy wastes were left some broken carts, the bones of a few animals who had foundered and died, and the bodies of old people perished from cold and exposure.

Back there, too, many left the fear that had followed their first exhilaration.

The first day had seemed miraculous, a triumphant day of escape from a long oppression. But on the second day, sober and cold, many recalled death that had come in the night. And by the third day all knew that a terrible and irrevocable step had been taken—the murder of ten out of the seventeen Cossack hostages, leaving only Vasilov, in Gedesu's charge ; Lieutenant Mikhailov and two others in the entourage of Ubasha ; two in Bambar's ulus ; and the Cossack Captain, Dudin the Frenchman, in Zebek's ulus.

On the third day all of the Torguts—feeling the shadow of deaths which the Tsarina would never forgive, like the shadow of a monstrous vulture following them over the snow-white steppe—kept fearful eyes cast backward for signs of pursuit from the Volga forts.

But late on the third day, reaching higher ground where the country was more rolling and wooded, a feeling of security began to pervade and slow the migration—a feeling of having accomplished the first objective of their march, as though the first impetus of flight had expended itself.

On the fourth day, barely thirty miles of this new country were traversed. The natural difficulty of the terrain, the rocks and ridges, the trees, the snow-choked gullies—all these things slowed the horde. It took all the skill of drivers to prevent, time and again, the unbalance and overturn of their carts ; and the sheep and goats, the sumpter-animals too, frequently missed their footing or wandered into some pit of snow. But it was the cattle, particularly, which were most blundering and difficult to control.

Nearly a dozen of Grandma's herd, for instance, went plunging suddenly over an untrodden slope. This was late in the afternoon of the fourth day ; and in the swift blue twilight they drowned, churning the snow in pale whirlpools over their heads.

Grandma was stung by the tragedy. Tenek stood helplessly by, making vague sounds of sympathy as he watched the little spouts of snow blown up by bubbles of expiring breath. But the commotion had barely begun to die away—like ripples over the cattle settling in death—before Grandma leaped down from her cart.

"Yelden !" she cried. "Merghen !"

It so happened that Yelden, brother of Norbo, and Merghen, who worked as herdsman for Gedesu, were nearby. Therefore when she called for their aid, according to law they came.

But also came Gedesu.

"Here now," he said, "what's this? Merghen must watch my herds. . . . What's happened? Ah, cattle drowned—hm! Horses and sheep are safer—always said so, isn't it so?"

He looked around for corroboration, tilting his head back as though trying to peer out with his empty eye from beneath a grimy bandage. Dismounting, he looked at Tenek.

"Yes, trust a fool to lead you to ruin," he said to Grandma. "Here you let Subutai and Tenek between them do as they please, wasting our wealth, and pay no heed whatever to things I say!"

Tenek, frightened by the way the one-eyed man was looking at him, dodged as though expecting a blow. Tenek's fear might have put such an idea in Gedesu's mind, although it might have been there from the start. At any rate, Gedesu made a threatening gesture in Tenek's direction; and in doing so he lost his balance, slipping and sliding down into the gully, thrashing about in the snow. At such a sight, Grandma and the two men laughed heartily; and Tenek, making sure his enemy was out of reach, made shrill happy sounds.

By the time Gedesu came floundering up from the snow, his face red and puffing, Yelden and Merghen were already armed with wooden shovels and were gingerly working their way down the drifted slope. Gedesu stood where he was, holding a dead cow's tail like a talisman above the broken snow; he took sufficient time to regain his temper before he spoke, making a wry face.

"A man has to be careful, isn't it so?"

But Tenek, who seemed to detect the bitter enmity concealed under Gedesu's mask of pleasantry, ran whimperingly away and hid.

The herdsmen began to toss the cottony top-snow and the more solid part of the drift aside. Gedesu, who was

beginning to probe about for the bodies of other cattle, now called, even more good-naturedly than before :

"Granny, you run along and keep warm—I'll take care of all."

"Well ! What's come over Gedesu !" said Grandma sarcastically, whetting some long knives. "I guess I can still butcher my own beef," she said, winking at Merghen and Yelden.

In the twilight they worked with cold stiff fingers. Several torches, of reeds soaked in mutton fat, were lit. In the trampled and blood-soaked gully, their shadows bobbed grotesquely against the banks of snow.

Gedesu's mouth watered, seeing the fat chunks of good beef cut from the quarters and ribs of the cattle.

"Well, to-night we'll all eat well, anyway !" he couldn't help saying. "That's a fact—isn't it so ?"

But Grandma, regarding him with a dry look, had other ideas.

"I intend to salt this beef," she said. "It'll be needed and eaten soon enough, before we're through."

Yelden and Merghen agreed, for in view of the long winter migration it would be wrong to do anything else. But their faces expressed, none the less, the same disappointment as Gedesu's. They brightened, however, when Grandma said that to each one, for his help, would go a full quarter of beef. But Gedesu worked less eagerly now sullenly thinking of such good beef salted away in Granny's cart. Yet when the time came to carry the cuts out of the gully, he had another idea.

"Look here, Granny," he said. "Perhaps I have more room in some of my carts to carry the meat."

"I'll carry my own," she said briskly.

It became apparent, however, that in order to make room for the quartered beef she must certainly leave some of her household goods behind.

"Well, perhaps I'll give a few things to the neighbours

she said. "That big copper festival pot, for one thing—it's no earthly use."

Gedesu regarded the great pot, finely made, an article of supreme distinction, squinting with his good eye.

"It's a real fact," he said, "it's big—but that's because you feed so few, nowadays. Whereas with me, it's different. . . . It's a bother to carry such an ungainly thing, but still——"

"Perhaps I'll give it to Yelden's wife," said Grandma.

"But you can't do that!" cried Gedesu sharply, opening his eye wide. "If it goes, Granny, it must go to me!"

"I'll give it where I please," Grandma said coldly. "Now take your fore-quarter and go along!"

And so Gedesu, bearing the quarter of beef, mounted his horse. Several times the horse, feeling the wet flesh weighting his back, turned to sniff. Gedesu struck at him viciously with his whip.

Ghashun and Vasilov had already made camp, stretching a travelling tent in the lee of the carts, when Gedesu rode up and tossed the fore-quarter to the ground. . . . He was petulant while he waited for Ghashun to cook the beef. He related the whole incident several times, aggrievedly, pointing out Grandma's penury in the whole matter. And instead of waiting for the meat to be done, he kept reaching into the pot and slicing meat from the steaming chunks. He broke this most ancient law—that which prohibits a man from reaching a knife into the pot—with a display of bravado as though to accent his broad-minded disgust with the whole petty world. Grunting and munching, he flung gristle and bone to his snarling dogs; and he cursed at Vasilov steadily, inventing new tasks for him all the time.

"Lucky I don't slit his belly like a sheep!" he muttered once. "I'd like to see Subutai stand in my way!"

Ghashun paused and said:

"Oh, there are other ways to fix that fine upstart brother of yours, never fear! After all, Vasilov is handy—and just

consider this—perhaps through Vasilov himself, there may be a way to strike back at Subutai. . . .”

When she said this she looked down in the pot, seemingly preoccupied with the meat cooking over the argol fire where they crouched together under a cart. She bit her tongue, not having meant to say such a thing at all, and hoped Gedesu was so busy guzzling that he hadn't heard. But he jerked his head around sharply, as he had done before, as though peering out from under the bandage with his sightless eye.

“What ways?” he said then. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, becoming bitter and scolding in order to change the subject. “Nothing that a weak worm of a man like you would understand. . . . Why, look,” she said, raising her voice angrily, “the man's own grandmother has a pot—a fine copper pot that should go to the eldest son—and he stands idle while she gives it to neighbours—to Yelden's wife, of all people! . . . What a worm of a man!” she said, addressing herself to Merghen, who had just come up.

“What's all the trouble?” Merghen said, shuffling his boots in the snow and bending over to warm himself at the fire.

Gedesu, his fat cheeks blushing furiously in the firelight, puffed and twisted his bulk on the matting under the cart; he spat out a piece of gristle and belched.

“Why, just this,” he said complainingly. “I was just now saying, it's a shame we must all travel so slowly just because some people have cattle that get lost in the snow. How do we know the Cossacks aren't following, back on the marsh? . . . Let those who can travel fast go ahead, I say.”

“Why, neighbour,” Merghen said with mild sarcasm, “dogs and horses go fastest of all, isn't it so? Soon they would be far beyond—our warriors would be gone. The

sheep would run here and there, willy-nilly, and the old and lame would be lost. . . . What sort of thing would that be, isn't it so ? ”

“ That's how it goes in the Russian towns,” said Vasilov, who had joined them. “ This man, that one, go swiftly and easily where they will. But in the factory towns, like Sarepta, most men travel all day on the treadmill and arrive nowhere at all.”

“ That's because they're lazy,” Ghashun said bitterly. “ It's their sloth and laziness brought them to such a pass ! ”

“ The woman is right,” said Gedesu pompously, cutting himself a new chunk of the meat, which was now steaming fragrantly in the pot.

Merghen and Vasilov sniffed hungrily.

Gedesu looked up and said angrily, “ Be off ! . . . Can't a man have a little peace and ease in his own home ? ”

Vasilov laughed harshly.

“ Merghen,” said Ghashun abruptly, “ go bind Vasilov for the night.”

“ And mind,” Gedesu called after him, “ use the old thongs.”

“ What,” cried Ghashun, “ to save leather the man allows a good slave to escape ? Worm ! One must spend more sometimes, in order to lose less. . . . Merghen, the new thongs ! ” she called.

After they had eaten their fill, long after Gedesu had given rise to many a gluttoned belch and gone off to his tent, he lay awake. He thought of his brother Subutai, travelling irresponsible and free somewhere far ahead ; of the fool Tenek, of people's unkind laughter, of his grandmother's dislike. Only Ghashun, it seemed, was really concerned with his well-being in spite of her bitter manner. All the incidents of the day rankled in his memory ; and it seemed that he had cut a sorry figure indeed, put-upon and derided by all. These thoughts all began to centre, like a steaming stew, in the great copper pot which might even now be in

the hands of Yelden's wife. Such an outcome would be the last indignity of all, one that Ghashun would never forgive. . . . Not long before dawn, then, Gedesu crept out of the tent and stood shivering in the stillest and coldest part of the night before starting furtively toward Grandma's cart.

Ghashun, too, had been awake. And now, hearing Gedesu sneak away through the snow, she smiled thinly. She thought of many things too—of Subutai, and of people's dislike of herself, and of Vasilov. She listened, hearing a few dogs stir in the direction where Gedesu had gone ; and then she heard, listening, the deep snore of Vasilov somewhere above on the cart. . . . Her face suddenly tense, almost like a smile, she crept from the tent and moved quickly to where he lay.

Vasilov was wrapped in a goatskin with his arms, outside, bound securely to his body. His head had fallen back so that his cap had nearly slipped off, and his fair hair and beard seemed lightly frosted in the dark.

"Dog," she muttered, "foreigner !"

But as she looked at him thus, her knife poised to strike, her thin lips were parted with a strange rush of warm breath, and the blade felt cold and lonely as the night wind. Her arm faltered. Could it be then, she thought, she had not come to kill ? Her breath seemed to whistle loud and white as steam in the night. Was it only love, she thought, not Subutai, only the hot body of life she desired, only the body of Vasilov, a fair-bearded stranger she had thought to kill in vengeance on Subutai ? . . . Still trembling, she now cut the thongs binding his arms, and her breath came in small white spurts from her mouth. She shook unbearably, seeing him rouse ; and heedless of the open night, she leaned over and with her lips, her hands, began to caress his waking face.

But suddenly, striking through the silence like a gong, Gedesu came stumbling out of the dark after the great

copper pot which had fallen and now rolled to a metallic stop against one of the cart-wheels. Puffing noisily, retrieving the pot, he peered through the shadows at Ghashun, who was climbing down from the cart.

"What?" was all he could say, puffing. "What?"

For just a moment she quivered, a figure of guilt with the knife in her hand and her tremulous lips. And Gedesu, holding the great copper pot cupping his belly, regarded her with speechless accusation. But she quickly recovered herself and prodded at the pot held before him like a copper belly, hissing.

"Hush, fool—what have you done now? . . . I was looking to see the Cossack was safe—I heard something, I thought he was making escape. . . . Stop looking like a fool—you've roused them all, it seems! Fine work you've done to-night—stealing your grandmother's pot!"

"But," said Gedesu, "but I got it for you—quick, take it—for you! It's yours!"

He turned, listening to a commotion growing louder in the neighbourhood of Grandma's camp. Far ahead the brass cannon suddenly sounded, rocking the air. He thrust the great pot at her.

"Yes, it's yours—hide it somewhere!" he babbled, hearing people beginning to rouse. "That fool Tenek—he had to be right in the way! I'm not sure he saw me . . . but what's the difference?" he said, with a defensive whine. "If she was giving it to Yelden's wife, it's wrong—it's mine to give—"

But it was too late to hide the pot. For Grandma was coming, with Tenek capering by her side; and with her came Khoochin and some of the elder men from the aimak, and many of the people roused by the commotion and the morning cannon. Through the whole horde now, horns and drums were sounding. . . . To Gedesu and Ghashun, standing helplessly by their carts in the dim light of dawn, came the crowd. The great pot lay upturned in the snow.

"Is this your pot?" said Khoochin.

"Yes," Grandma said briskly. "Sit down on it, Tenek—can't tell, with people like this around."

People laughed at her sarcasm, at Gedesu, who was blustering and frightened.

"But," he said, "but she was giving it to Yelden's wife—it ought to be mine, by right——"

"For shame, Gedesu—stealing goods!" said someone.

Now Grandma came directly up to Gedesu and waggled her bony finger under his nose.

"One hundred sheep!" she cackled triumphantly. She turned to the crowd, saying, "Isn't it so?"

Khoochin was stroking his thin beard, looking at Gedesu his son-in-law to see what he might do in such an impasse. There was a sly twinkle in Khoochin's eyes—for he, like most others, disliked the greedy and pompous elder son of Temuru.

The camp all about them was now a bedlam of noise and confusion—all calculated deliberately, it seemed to Gedesu, to make him unable to think or speak. He looked at Khoochin, trying to judge what might be wisest for him to say. He knew that the old man, mindful of the economic well-being of his own daughter, might be unwilling, really, to see Gedesu shorn of a hundred sheep. So he finally said:

"One hundred sheep—but it's not possible! See, I'm a poor man with barely enough for wife and family—as you well know, Father-in-law!"

"That's a lie," someone said; "you got all Norbo's sheep."

"And Subutai's too," said Grandma.

They all waited for Khoochin to judge.

It was true, what Gedesu had thought regarding his father-in-law. Khoochin and his daughter Ghashun had put their heads together a moment, whispering. And now the old man spoke.

"In a case of this kind," he said learnedly, "the law

reads thus : If a man begrudges his sheep, then let him give the finger of one of his hands."

Ghashun had suddenly disappeared. And Gedesu found himself entirely alone, surrounded by unfriendly faces, all waiting for him to speak. Grandma looked at him with a stern smile. In the blue light of dawn all looked cold and heartless to Gedesu. People shuffled impatiently in the slush and snow, with here and there someone sneezing but none laughing or talking now. He looked at the great copper pot, thinking bitterly that it was not for himself but truly for Ghashun he'd risked his sheep ! While she ? Suddenly, vagrantly, there returned to him a brief memory of her face drawn tight as a smile, her lips loose and tremulous. . . . Viciously he kicked at the copper pot, so that Tenek sprang up like a frightened chime. The hunchback ran to cower against Grandma's legs. Gedesu drew a forlorn deep breath and raised his head at last.

"Very well, then," he said, bitter and sly. He spread out a pudgy hand. "One finger shall you get—but none of my sheep !"

"Very well, too," said Grandma, scornful and cold. "Merghen, bring us an axe ! The man's not even a sheep—he's an argol ! And you, Tenek," she said, "since you caught his crooked finger at work—take the honour of striking it off !"

All thought that this was a just outcome of the whole affair, for among the Torguts thievery was regarded with an almost mathematical sternness. But when Temuru learned of these events, he was saddened by such a new instance of Gedesu's greed. He rode silently in the dawn, pondering the case of his elder son, until finally he said in disgust :

"Such a man as Gedesu ! An eye—now a finger ! Listen—if thereby he gained a hundred sheep each time, he'd let his body be hacked apart bit by bit—isn't it so ?"

Subutai and Norbo, who were riding near-by, looked at each other and winked. Subutai said :

"I hear that Grandma said, 'Such a man is not even a sheep—he's an argol!'"

"That's good," Norbo said, grinning, "that's very good! But the very best of it is, she gives Tenek the axe to strike it off!"

Temuru sighed deeply; and then he spat—there were other things to think about. . . .

And so they rode on.

Before them spread rolling land covered with snow. Here and there, trees marked the channels of frozen creeks. Clear and cold was the air, and the sun shone in a wintry sky yellow and low. To lessen the glare of snow, men wore a dark rouge on their cheek-bones and on the lids of their eyes. Frequently the tracks of rabbit and marten were seen, and some of the men, particularly the younger ones, glanced longingly at the snow-covered rocks and underbrush where game might be found. But the older and more cautious men rode straight ahead, aware that every ravine and wooded water-course might conceal enemies.

The Jaik River was not far away, perhaps less than a day's travel; and on the Jaik there were Russian forts and Cossack garrisons. Kirghiz-Kazaks, too, were not far to the north-east.

Approaching this critical stage of the migration, the rate of travel slowed considerably on the fifth day. Small bands of scouts reconnoitred for miles in every direction. This was strange and unfriendly country. Yet because of the very nature of the terrain, which only yesterday had seemed preferable to the barren marsh, the people were spread over a vaster area than before. A feeling of nervous tension gripped the horde.

In the afternoon of the fifth day, scouts suddenly came on the tracks of a vast body of horsemen. It was impossible to tell who the horsemen were, which way they had come and gone, or how long ago they had passed. The scouts dashed back toward the advance troops, who were riding over a

wide front several miles ahead of the leading hoshuns of carts and animals.

Ubasha Khan, who was with Temuru and Momotubash among the troops, heard the news with dismay. Although it was only mid-afternoon, he called an abrupt halt.

Messengers were sent back through all the uluses, ordering the aimaks and hoshuns to close their ranks as closely as possible. Princes and leaders were summoned to a military council, to be held after dark.

Rumours and excitement spread through the horde. "Hey there, soldier!" people called to the galloping messengers. "Is it true, the Cossacks are fighting our men up ahead?"

"It's the Kirghiz, neighbour," other people said: "they've got us surrounded!"

But the messengers, galloping in search of the shulengas and officers of the aimaks, had little information other than their orders.

"Uncle," the messengers would address the shulengas, "move your people up closer there—you're taking enough room for a dozen hoshuns!"

"Can't be done, soldier."

"Khan's orders."

"Yes, but can't you see, man—that's Yannin's aimak, up ahead! We belong over to the left, maybe a mile or more."

Subutai, despatched with a message to Prince Bambar in the rear, encountered many such hoshuns trying to regain their proper positions. The three great columns of the horde had widened and split, so that, in the hillier countryside, there were innumerable trains of animals and carts working their way along the white and winding meadow bottoms. Frequently the hoshuns of an aimak, separating to pass around a rocky ridge, drew miles apart from one another. Now that the advance aimaks had halted, many of these lost hoshuns were trying frantically to move either right or left before passage was completely blocked by new-

comers. Often Subutai had to wait while clamorous masses of animals were driven across his path in search of their own aimaks.

The cold afternoon air was filled with snow-dust. Animals bellowed, dogs barked. People shouted excitedly. Here and there carts which had been overturned by hasty drivers were being righted while women held the oxen's heads to keep them from bolting. Boys and girls dashed about on ponies, cracking their long whips, herding the animals. Such a vast hubbub was in the air that people, although they shouted, could scarcely hear one another.

Once Subutai came to a thick woods which stretched for perhaps a half-mile to each side of a stream. It was like an island of silence in the midst of a tumultuous sea. The Torguts were superstitious of forests, and the great migrating columns were passing around the valley of dark wintry trees at a considerable distance to both north and south. Subutai galloped along the bank of the stream, under the silent trees. From far away, like the echo in some cave of the mighty but distant roar of the sea, came faint sounds from the horde. Occasionally a shout, however, or the barking of a dog, seemed to come from somewhere close at hand, from among the dark trees. And then Subutai galloped faster than ever.

When he emerged from the forest, the sun was already low in the western sky. Vast columns of people and animals were still moving up from the west, wave after wave pouring over the slopes in a seemingly endless flood. Subutai sought the ridges, the rockier slopes wherever he could. Yet he would top a slope only to find himself facing another great sea of plodding animals and swaying, rattling carts. Far off, in the last light of the sun, on a distant slope, he could see other hosts of people and animals silhouetted, infinitely small but black, against the sunset sky. And on a ridge still more distant in the west, perhaps twenty miles away, where nothing could be clearly distinguished, the red

sunlight glinted occasionally on a shiny weapon or on the ornamented trappings of some rich man's horse.

But here the country was far less hilly, and Subutai was finally able to find an opening between the great columns. He galloped at good speed, now, toward the rear.

It was well after dark when he passed the last straggling hoshuns. A thin moon was in the western sky, faintly lighting the trampled land. Where the horde had passed, snow and mud lay churned and pebbled in the desolate glow of the moon. The mighty roar of the migration was already dwindling in the east. For a moment Subutai shivered, thinking that he might have missed the troops of the rearguard. The land to the west was deserted and silent. He slowed his mare to a walk, listening intently. And then he heard, faint but distinct, the sound of galloping horsemen. . . .

It was nearly midnight when Subutai and old Prince Bambar, accompanied by a small company of men, reached the vanguard encampment where the Sarga, the Torgut council, was to be held. The horde had slowly compacted itself, although the carts and animals still covered a vast countryside, lighted by innumerable fires now that the moon had set. Here there were many trees and much good underbrush, and great piles of firewood had been gathered for the council fire. Along all the borders of the horde, soldiers rode in double sentry lines. The warriors rode in the dark, shaking their lances and muskets fervidly and taking sporadic aim at shadows of tree and rock. Subutai rode off to join his company, who were stationed six miles down the eastern sentry line from the council fire, and the Sarga began at last.

Members of the council sat on felt mats spread near the great fire, studying crude parchment maps which indicated, among other things, the courses of the rivers and the disposition of the Russian forts.

Prince Bambar tugged at his grey moustaches and said

very little, but he watched the various speakers with narrowed eyes. Chereng, a plausible man of forty, a Djungarian prince who had joined the Torguts at the time of the Chinese massacre in 1758, spoke frequently of "defensible positions" and "bargaining power." And Zebek, President of the Sarga—a man seven years older than his cousin Ubasha ; a good-looking man with dissolute and deep-set eyes—kept rolling and unrolling the maps which he himself and the Lama Loosang had drawn.

"As you can readily see," he said in a bored tone of voice, "we are now little more than one day west of the Jaik—less than a full day south of the Fort Koulagina. . . . Incidentally, I might say these maps are as good as any the Russians and Cossacks have. In Tcherkask I studied many things, including maps."

Zebek smiled deprecatingly, tapping the parchments. The men, sitting close to the fire, had their coats and furs open at the chest and their fur hats pushed back from their foreheads. Momotubash, grunting, leaned forward.

"Including the higher strategy of flight," he said bluntly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen !" said Ubasha uncomfortably. "Bygones are bygones, please !"

"Yes—let's get down to business !" said Bambar, speaking for the first time.

"Exactly," said Chereng, spreading one of Zebek's maps so that all could see it fairly well in the firelight. "Now, if you'll please notice—there are three lines of forts. Number one—north and south on the Volga. North and south on the Jaik—number two." He tapped the parchment, indicating where their winter and summer lands had been. "Together, they've been able to squeeze us, gentlemen, boxing us in."

"Yes, yes, we know all that," Momotubash muttered. Temuru nudged his old friend, knowing Momotubash disliked both Zebek and Chereng, but hoping to keep a

quarrel from breaking out. Momotubash muttered angrily, "But we really know all that, isn't it so?"

Chereng concealed his irritation and continued :

"Now, if you'll notice again—number three is the Tobolsk Line, considerably north, running from west to east. The Russians will be powerless to strike, once we have crossed the Jaik. For the Tobolsk Line is too far in the north."

"What about the tracks in the snow?" grumbled Momotubash.

"I was about to suggest," Zebek said dryly, "that we alter our course somewhat and cross the Jaik lower down. Probably the tracks are old—Cossacks, I imagine, going south for the winter fishing at the Caspian Sea. The next fort, notice, is far to the south. Cross between them—and then, what's there to keep us from going straight on to the Emba?"

"Where our position will be highly defensible," said Chereng eagerly, "virtually impregnable, with the Emba before us and the Mugadir hills at our back!"

"Perhaps as impregnable as you told the Djungars they were, back in '58," Momotubash burst out again. "You're another one of these experts in the higher strategy of flight! How defensible were the half-million Djungars whom the Chinese Khan murdered like so many sheep?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" said Ubasha Khan.

Temuru, aware that the difficulty lay deeper than his comrade's blunt disdain for Chereng and Zebek, now resolved to keep the partisan conflict within the council from breaking into an open fight, if possible. So he said :

"Torguts. It has long been known that times of war and of peace are two different times, each calling for its own wisdom. If this were a peaceful migration, it would be wise indeed to pass like small and silent calves far from the Russian forts. But is this a time of peace? Rather I think

it is war—at least, the Russian and Cossack troops will consider it so. We must employ the strategy and tactics of war. What could these things be?”

No one spoke, although Temuru was aware that Zebek looked at him with a slightly mocking smile. Chereng was scowling at Momotubash, who nodded contentedly at Temuru's words. Bambar, although previously he had seemed inclined to Zebek and Chereng, now frowned in meditation. The Khan Ubasha stroked his thin beard gently, good-naturedly, although his eyes were fixed impassively on the fire. Temuru reached toward a pile of wood and tossed several faggots into the flames.

“I think,” he said slowly, “we should send a strong detachment to encircle the fort. The crossing is very good just south of Koulagina. To the more distant south the banks are steep and perhaps covered with ice. Why leave the enemy free to attack, unless we wish trouble? Bottle the enemy up, I say.”

Bambar and Momotubash nodded in agreement.

“Gentlemen,” said Ubasha, raising his head and looking around more decisively than was usual for him, “I think this plan is good. . . . I should like to take, say, five or six thousand men and one of the cannon, perhaps, and besiege the fort while our people cross. . . . Surely this plan of Temuru is good.”

All but Chereng and Zebek mumbled agreement. Zebek, President of the Sarga, looked around the circle quickly and said :

“Such then is the will of the Sarga. Let our brave Temuru and our wise Khan Ubasha carry through their plan. So, or not so?”

The men mumbled again, for they were weary of discussion and beginning to think of sleep. But Momotubash said, scowling at Zebek :

“Why so sweet and agreeable all of a sudden? One moment you say one thing, and the next moment another.”

Ubasha made a gesture of annoyance at these quarrelsome words. But Zebek spoke quickly again.

"Let me answer such a thing this way," he said. "We are all in the debt of Temuru. He has spoken well, and surely some of us were in need of just such words. I, myself, gentlemen—perhaps it's true, I've been guilty of thinking ahead too far, too fast, perhaps. Surely this is a time of war. We must consider all things more carefully."

"I am delighted with our good Zebek," Ubasha said eagerly. "He has the courage to admit his mistakes, and all is well. I am convinced by our talk to-night, gentlemen, that we may compose all our differences peaceably, now and hereafter, for the good of our whole people."

Thus the council came to an end.

The members scattered to their various commands ; and when some people, awake in near-by camps, saw the great council fire begin to die, they were aware that a decision, whatever it might be, had been reached—and that now they could sleep.

Far along the borders of the horde, under a sky like black glass slightly frosted with stars, the warrior guardsmen rode sleeplessly until several hours later they were relieved.

Temuru slept soundly until he was roused by Subutai ; and then he rode, refreshed and content, along the line. But far off there were many wolves howling, running swiftly somewhere on the snow ; and the cold wind came swirling down gullies from all sides, shaking his eardrums, as though with the blows of many silent but wolf-like passions. Thoughts of men seeking their own ends, perhaps at the expense of the migrating horde, assailed the old fighter. What was Zebek up to ? He and Chereng—yes, and even the Lama Loosang—were birds of a feather ; they were all up to something that meant no good for the people. What was their game ? . . . But it was impossible for the blunt and honest saissang to answer his own question.

He peered ahead, in the direction where the sun was wont each day to rise ; nothing lay before his eyes save treacherous shadows. He frowned as he recalled what Subutai had told him, when they were riding together this morning.

Subutai had told of his own doubts and fears, the preceding night—his wonder that there might be no way of knowing what lay ahead. Then Subutai, glowing like a discoverer, had told of finding how men could make what they willed of what lay ahead, if they believed in the old motto, that a man's path, no matter by glory or suffering, led to freedom.

Temuru spat in the snow. To him, schooled in an earlier and less perplexing day, such things were nonsense. Freedom, he thought—who wasn't free? He was free, Subutai was free ; only the slaves weren't free. In his day, he had always understood the old motto to mean that a man's path must lead to glorious death or victory. Temuru could not understand that long ago this motto had been a battle-cry for a freedom broader than that of the individual ; nor could he see a freedom higher, or other, than that of the warrior who chose to accept, as ends in themselves, the alternatives of death or victory.

A man came to one thing and then another, thought Temuru ; and that was all. To besiege the Fort Koulagina, to cross the Jaik and then the Emba—these things were good. But then ? Face to face with modern perplexities, with schemers whose thoughts he couldn't penetrate, with a terrible memory of victories which had led, in the end, only to this homeless ocean of snow, Temuru could find no answer. In the council to-night, the quarrel between the Ubasha and the Zebek partisans—no matter what the khan seemed to think—had not ended, but had only begun again. There were many rivers to cross, many enemies, many decisions to make, and battles to fight.

Temuru, for the first time in his life, felt a desperate need

for some such thoughtful string as Subutai's on which to hang the beads of fact, otherwise meaningless and without goal. Ahead, feeling heavy and old in the dark and chilling wind, Temuru could see nothing but uncertainty, trouble, and perhaps disaster.

CHAPTER SIX



The next day, nearly at noon, with a great fanfare of cymbals and horns, with a great shout from the Torgut horde, Ubasha Khan and six thousand warriors rode, with their muskets and lances shining in the bright winter sun, toward the north.

But if Temuru, approaching the siege of Koulagina, felt doubt and misgiving about the future, he thought it was largely age. For in age the warrior, although his eye may be keen as in his youth, his heart as bold, his arm as strong and even more cunning, still, it is no longer enough ; and the summit taken, the conquered dead at his feet, these no longer make his eye sparkle in the sun nor his chest heave with emotion ; but rather he stands quietly, holding his breath it seems, peering beyond at the vague outline of things seen only in age. . . . The things at his feet are no longer demons overcome, glittering champions now under-foot ; they are only men somewhat like himself, except they lie forlornly as sheep emptied of blood. And the white-washed walls, now breached and blood-stained, are no longer those of a castle incredibly like a jewel in the strong sun, a citadel of some fabulous world, but only crumbling mud bricks with desolate tufts of straw revealed. . . . The magical quality which, in youth, seemed to invest these things—it has fled from them, whither ? Raising his eyes gravely from the debris at his feet, he pursues with a questioning gaze, far over the plain, the enchantment that once covered with radiance all these bodies and bricks ; no

longer here, neither is it there ; and he can only see, like a chill grey haze under the sun, the vulturous shadow of death.

For Subutai, on the contrary, the sun seemed more brilliant, the air keener and more clear than ever before, riding north toward the Russian fort.

The clean snow, washed by sun and wind, was fresh and magical as some untravelled sea. The horde could no longer be seen, save for snow-dust drifting for miles above the southern horizon, marking their progress.

Subutai laughed and galloped, shouting, shaking his rifle high in the air.

They were all in high spirits.

"Man," shouted Norbo, "I hope somebody remembered the arrack. There's nothing like it, on a cold winter night when a man's at war !"

"The khan must have brought much, since there are many men," said Batu, another warrior ; "or so I hear."

"He'd better," cried Norbo, "or we'll break open the fort and get drunk on vodka."

"You're drunk on air already," shouted Subutai, laughing. "Watch you don't lose your head, man !"

"Not mine !" Norbo wagged his head with laughter. "But if I get neither arrack nor vodka, some Cossack will lose his, I guarantee !"

The plan, however, was not to storm the fort. By taking the Cossacks unaware, encircling Koulagina, the Torguts could keep their enemies from attacking the flanks of the horde during the crossing of the Jaik. As Ubasha pointed out, there was no need for foolhardy acts that might only further complicate matters with the Tsarina. By sudden siege, also, the Torguts could prevent any riders from escaping on the Orenburg Road for help from the provincial garrison in the north. The plan, consequently, was to approach and surround the fort under cover of darkness.

Late in the afternoon, having travelled steadily toward the

north-east, the Torgut troops came into a countryside of many gullies, all leading down to the Jaik, and finally to the forested slopes of the Jaik itself.

Ubasha's pennons dipped. A ripple of command ran back through the columns of riders. All halted.

Now it was suddenly still, so that scouts out ahead could listen and look for possible ambush. Overhead a few vultures sailed; their black wings shining in the sun. A rabbit burst from a thicket of trees and ran madly zigzagging on the snow-covered ice. Dead leaves fell from deciduous trees and blew with a scratching noise over the crusted snow. . . .

Then the blue-and-white pennons were raised again ; and in good order, troop by troop, the men rode down the slope and across the ice. There were five hundred men sent by Zebek, and a thousand fighters from Bambar, and the same number from Chereng ; and there were thirty-five hundred of Ubasha's own men, who had brought one of their brass cannon along to impress the Cossacks ; and the ice echoed sonorously when they crossed. There were also a few of the old men, including Khoochin, with the finest of the berkuts clutching their wrists, for there might be some hunting ; and dogs ran ahead and trotted behind. Now, taking advantage of the slight delay in crossing the Jaik, some of the men sliced a little dried milk from the chunks they carried in their kalats ; they crammed snow together with the dried milk into leather bottles that hung from their saddles, where the snow would soon melt and the milk dissolve. All of the men carried these chunks of dried milk, and cuts of meat under their saddles ; and the old men, bringing the berkuts, had also some camp pots of iron and an emergency ration of argols ; and all had a little barley and a little tea.

The cannon, rumbling over the ice, was hauled up the eastern bank of the Jaik in the wake of the men. Now for a considerable distance no signs of life were seen, save overhead a few vultures endlessly sailing, and vast flocks of carrion

crows appearing from out over the eastern plains to lodge for the night in forests near the river.

The Torguts rode north along the edge of the woods on the east bank of the Jaik. Occasionally a rider, brushing against a tree, dislodged snow that slid down a branch of pine to burrow hollowly in a drift. Sometimes the troops passed where the forest was thin ; and toward the low red sun the ice of the Jaik could be seen, frozen like polished metal so that snow had blown from it except in occasional streaks. At another time, the forest was cleft by a short eastern branch of the Jaik ; here the way led between dark and silent walls of evergreen trees, and here night seemed to have come, swift and premature.

It was at this point, abruptly, that the Torgut troops came upon signs of human life.

A body of riders, numbering perhaps a hundred or more, had paused here to eat. Their departure had been recent, to judge from several dark patches where snow had been melted by coals that were still warm.

The Torguts looked at the silent walls of the forest as an order came back along the line to halt ; and they fingered their weapons uneasily.

Temuru, who was forward with Ubasha, leaned low from his saddle to study the ground where the fire had been.

"Kirghiz," he said, pointing to many holes in the snow. "Lances. Cossacks and Russians have muskets."

"Then," said Ubasha, "we must pursue them. For perhaps they have learned of our coming and will warn the garrison at the fort."

"Likely enough," said Temuru, fingering his moustache. "May I offer a plan ?"

"Let me hear."

"First, then, I would suggest there be as little killing as need be, since it would be unwise to rouse the Little Horde against us. Therefore let me take several small troops of

men swiftly mounted, to cut off the Kirghiz from escape to the east or west, to drive them straight toward the fort. And second, let these all be men with muskets, so that the Russians will know we are well armed. You and the main body of men can follow rapidly as possible."

Temuru, watching Ubasha tug at his silky moustaches, knew that what the khan liked best was a moment of free choice such as this, unharassed by Zebek and Chereng.

"I like your plan well," Ubasha said at last. "Choose your men, and luck be with you."

Temuru chose those with swift mounts and muskets, the most fearless among the fighters. "Ride in close formation," he said, "and watch for dangers in the dark." With three hundred men he drew away from the main troop. The Kirghiz had obviously gone north on the river. Temuru sent a troop of one hundred men up the eastern bank, under Subutai, and a force up the west bank under a saissang named Choktu. "There will be a clear moon," he said. "Ride swiftly; and who reaches the fort first, circle it from the north, so that none may escape on the road to Orenburg." He himself, with a hundred men, followed the tracks of the Kirghiz horses up the snow-covered ice of the Jaik.

The banks were steep and thick with trees; but in the gloom the ghostly snow could be seen trampled and pock-marked by hooves where the Kirghiz had found safe footing, now near the right bank and now near the left.

Subutai, leading his men up the eastern bank, found beyond the trees a red glow of sunset coming over the forest wall to colour the air and snow. It was growing still colder, and the breath of horses and men steamed thickly in the crimson air.

The men rode fast, silently.

After a time, when the sunset glow faded from the sky, then the cold pallor of the moon was there. Once or twice Subutai raised his hand for a halt, listening for the sound of

fighting or shouts from the river. But in the contracting cold of the night, nothing could be heard but the heaving and snorting of the horses and an occasional deep twang of ice cracking to settle more heavily against the river shores.

As they rode on again, Norbo kept muttering darkly at the trees, shaking his musket as though the forest were full of cowardly Kirghiz ; and once when they halted he asked Subutai to let him take several men and double down through the woods to the river and back.

"Others will have the fighting," he said, "and we, nothing."

"Only our lives," said Batu sarcastically.

"Coward !" cried Norbo.

Subutai smiled uneasily ; this was his first real command, and he wished to make no mistake.

"Silence," he said. "Is this a conclave of priests and fools ?"

"Yes," said Batu. "An unnecessary risk is a fool's choice, not a hero's tomb."

"Enough," said Subutai. "Ride on."

It must have been nearly midnight, and the fort not far, when Subutai ordered another abrupt halt. Now there could be no mistake. From the direction of the Jaik came the sound of muskets and shouting.

"Stay where you are !" called Subutai. "If any Kirghiz break cover, surround them !"

The men waited what seemed an interminable time. But there were no more shots, and the sound of shouting died away to the north. Obviously the Kirghiz, who had been making toward Koulagina, were letting themselves be driven to its gates. The men continued to wait ; but they were disappointed and glum.

Then near-by in the woods, suddenly there was a crackling of underbrush. Excitement woke in the men again. Norbo, who had been muttering all the while, unable to restrain

himself longer, dashed headlong toward the woods. Subutai called after him, but Norbo had disappeared among the trees.

Out in the open, things had been seen with the cold clarity of moonlight ; but once in the forest, vision was muffled except for the snow—so that to Norbo it seemed that he was in a great cave filled with mysterious objects, faintly phosphorescent. It was dark, the snow was deep. He slowed his horse, warily. Pine branches all about shed their white fur, sudden and softly cold. The horse lifted his forelegs with delicate precision and set them down with little circular quests for footing. Norbo heard whispering, or perhaps it was nothing but snow slithering down from the trees. Then he began to see a little—dead trees here and there among the living, their blackened branches protruding like charred bones from under the snow.

Norbo strained his eyes and ears, holding his musket ready, beset by superstitious fears. Several blurred shapes seemed to move among the trees. Kirghiz or phantoms, they were moving shapes ; and Norbo's power to act returned. He shot, and heard the shriek of a horse. And then a dead tree, freed by the shaking air, fell and struck him down in the snow that filled his mouth and nostrils like wet fur and his eyes and mind like darkness and silence.

Subutai and the men heard the musket shot, the shriek of the horse, the muffled crack of the tree. At first Subutai wanted to dash impetuously into the woods. But then he recalled his father's commands ; and he remembered a saying of the older men who had often fought with the Kirghiz, that the Kirghiz feared the trees, while the Torguts merely avoided them. And so he signalled the men to wait.

Presently two Kirghiz appeared at the edge of the woods.

One of them was a warrior of rank, wearing a Persian breastplate and a helmet of iron. Moonlight gleamed on

his armour and frosted the fine fur he wore opened at the breast.

The other, mounted on Norbo's unharmed horse, was more poorly dressed. He wore a sheepskin coat and the high-pointed Kirghiz cap. He held Norbo, whose hands and feet had been bound, across his thighs like a sack of flour.

The warrior spoke, calling out in Kirghiz :

"Is there one of you dogs who speak my tongue?"

"Throw down your arms," called Subutai in Torgut, "and speak in a language fit for men."

The Torguts laughed ; but they were worried about Norbo, seeing that the second Kirghiz held a Turkish dagger ready to plunge into their comrade's back. Batu, without thinking twice, raised his musket and sighted along the barrel. Subutai pushed the gun aside and said to the Kirghiz warrior :

"Well, then, do you speak Russian?"

"A little," said the warrior, speaking with a thicker and more halting accent than Subutai ; he continued, haughtily as possible in a difficult tongue, "I am Beran, a Kirghiz chief. We have no quarrel with you. We want only to return to our own country and speak with Nurali, our khan."

"I have orders to capture you," said Subutai. "Deliver over your weapons and our man, together with his horse. No harm shall come to you, I swear."

Beran seemed impressed by Subutai's words. He spoke to his companion in Kirghiz, and then he said to Subutai :

"Deliver us safely to the fort and you shall have back your man and his horse. Beran can be no captive."

He folded his arms and gazed arrogantly at the young Torgut. Subutai flushed angrily and wanted to dash to combat with the Kirghiz prince. But he waited until his temper cooled, and then he said :

"Swear on your holy book that you will make no attempt

to escape, and that you'll give us back Norbo unharmed at the fort."

"That I swear on the Koran—provided no harm threatens us on the way."

"By our own Bichik I swear," said Subutai. "Now come forward."

The Torguts grumbled when Subutai explained what had been said. Beran would allow no riders within ten lengths of himself. The men formed a hollow square and rode toward the fort, mumbling threats at the Kirghiz.

As they approached the fort, occasional musket shots were heard; and already the vanguard of Ubasha Khan could be heard, too, approaching along the river.

The Fort Koulagina was built on a mound, on the eastern side of the Jaik. Around it the forest had been cleared, down to the river bank and for a mile to the north and the south. The fort commanded a wide stretch of the river, where in the summer there was a ford, linking the Saratov Road to a military road from Koulagina to Orenburg in the north-east.

When Subutai and his men came to the clearing, they paused.

The walls of the fort glowed as with silver phosphorescence under the moon. From the bulbous wooden dome of the Russian church came the harsh sound of a bell being rung in alarm. The troops of Temuru and Choktu were riding in a wide circle at the base of the mound on which the fort was built.

The great timbered gates of Koulagina, where the Kirghiz had entered, were still ajar. Lanterns could be seen swinging close to the trampled ground inside the gates; horsemen were revealed in small clear silhouettes, and the Russian commands could be heard with distant clarity in the cold air. Along the walls of the forts were sentries with muskets levelled at the Torgut riders.

"Here we are," Subutai said excitedly to Beran, "and here you give us Norbo and go into the fort."

Beran, at his distance of ten lengths, smiled arrogantly.

"Take one of your men and come half-way to the fort with us," he said. "Otherwise, Torguts who know nothing of your oath might set upon us."

Subutai considered this, and it seemed reasonable to him, considering the excited shouts of Temuru's and Choktu's men. But Subutai's comrades were beginning to press impatiently toward Beran.

"Give us Norbo!" they shouted.

"Stay where you are, dogs!" cried Beran. His companion slit Norbo's coat with his dagger by way of warning. "I keep my word—but when I please!"

Now Norbo spoke, for the first time since his capture, in a muffled voice.

"Don't do it, Subutai!" he cried. "It's no good, it's a trick!"

"But he has given his word," said Subutai, uneasily, "and I have given my word, too. Batu, ride with us toward the fort."

The Torguts, still grumbling, opened their ranks to let the Kirghiz pass through, shaking their muskets angrily at Beran and his companion.

Subutai and Batu rode at a distance with the Kirghiz between, closer and closer to the hill where the fort stood. But inside the gates a great clamour and shouting rose, and Subutai could hear some of his own men galloping after them from behind. He shouted to Beran:

"Throw our man to the ground and ride on to the fort!"

That same moment a troop of Cossacks swarmed out through the gates and came pounding down the long slope of the hill. Beran and his companion, suddenly spurring their mounts, rode with Norbo up into the midst of the Russian riders.

Clearly the Cossacks had no idea that their besiegers were more than a few hundred Torguts, at whom they came charging with muskets and swords. But now from the edge of the clearing suddenly came a great shout as the main column of Ubasha Khan broke cover and galloped over the cleared ground. Torgut riders swarmed over the plain, shooting and forcing the Cossacks back up the trampled slope.

Subutai sat his horse in the midst of all this, dazed by the treachery of Beran and sick at heart at his own gullibility. The gates were swung shut on the last Cossack, and musket balls came whistling down from the walls of the fort. The Torguts, with a shout of victory, retired out of range of the shot. But still Subutai sat his horse near the foot of the hill.

The musket fire died away at last, and someone shouted down at Subutai from the fort.

Then he awoke, and straight up the hill to the walls of the fort he rode. His comrades far across the clearing watched the small figure of man and horse, black against the moonlit snow, and they feared for his life. But the men in the fort, watching him ride boldly toward them, let their muskets rest and they leaned over the wall. When he came close Subutai spoke.

"Where is the Kirghiz dog, Beran, the warrior without honour?"

A Cossack leaned down, so close that Subutai could see a cast in his eye and could feel the man's breath, fetid as the air near the door of a snug winter yurt.

"So you speak Russian, little champion," said the Cossack, in a tone of grudging admiration. "Wait, while I call the commander."

Subutai felt no fear, looking at the cold pinched faces of other men leaning over the wall. Now he could see cracks and straw in the wall that from afar had seemed glamorous and phosphorescent as a magic castle. And the odour of foul breath, the sneezing of a man somewhere along the

wall, made it suddenly appear that these were merely men like himself.

"Where is Beran," he called again, more loudly, "who pledged his word to give back our man in return for his own life?"

A murmur ran through the men behind the wall. These were tough men, recruited from all the criminal and adventurous corners of Russia to push the Tsarina's empire southward; their very name they had taken and corrupted from the most savage tribe of the Asian plain, the Kazaks; but in a superficial sense, at least, they placed great emphasis on honour. And so they heard what Subutai had to say, and they murmured approval.

The commander, puffing and red in the face from having just come out in the cold, mounted the fire-step behind the wall. Subutai guided his horse backward a few feet on the slippery ground so that he might look more levelly at the Russian officer on the wall. The commander, extremely fat in his heavy furs, turned and said:

"Beran."

Beran mounted beside him.

"Is it true," said the commander, "what this Torgut says?"

"No," said Beran. "The Torgut jackal broke his word before I had a chance to redeem my own."

"You lie like a Kirghiz dog," said Subutai.

Beran, whose face had been pale and cold as the moonlit metal of his armour, flushed darkly.

"No man can live who speaks such things of Beran," he said. "Gladly I'll pierce your heart with a lance or slit your throat with a knife."

He folded his arms and scowled, but Subutai smiled.

"Good," said Subutai, "let us meet at daybreak on the level ground. And if I lose, then you may go where you will. But if I win, then Norbo must be returned, and you must forfeit your horse and your armour."

"You have my word, dog," said Beran.

"Your word is worth nothing, dead or alive," said Subutai.

"At dawn you die," said Beran, his face cold-white again, stepping down from sight.

"Take my word for it, Torgut," said the Russian commander. Frost had begun to form on his astrakhan cap and his fur greatcoat. He leaned on the wall and said, "But why do you fellows want to make trouble like this? Why don't you go back home, instead of shooting us out of bed at night?"

Subutai shrugged.

"We mean you no harm," he said. "It's only your Tsarina and her man Kichinskoi we fight."

"Yes, but we too at Koulagina," said the commander, "are Her Imperial Majesty's men. . . . You Torguts were given arms and ammunition to fight the Kirghiz, not us. Then why come and besiege us with those same muskets?"

Subutai shrugged again.

"You have opened your own gates to Kirghiz," he said.

"We must give equal protection to all Her Imperial Majesty's people," the commander said.

Subutai felt confused for a moment; and so he waited to answer, looking at the wrinkles and blotches on the commander's red face, until he knew what he wished to say.

"You arm my people against the Kirghiz, and then you arm the Kirghiz against us; this way it has been now for a long time," he said slowly. "Very well, protect the Kirghiz. But as for us, we are not the Tsarina's people. We shall protect ourselves."

The commander wheezed angrily several times.

"You know nothing about it," he said. "Send someone to speak with me who has more thought."

"I came here not to talk," said Subutai, wheeling his horse.

He descended the slope without a backward glance. It was only when he saw moonlight reflected like thin white smoke across the wide clearing, when he saw how distant were the Torgut troops, massed like a dark circular wall near the forest, that Subutai realized how foolhardy he had been, riding under the muskets of the Cossacks to challenge not only Beran but, it somehow seemed, the Russian commander himself. . . . Something cold, like doubt or fear, pressed solidly against his chest. He urged his horse faster toward a fire built where the frozen river emerged from the woods, and he galloped into the midst of a group near the crackling flames.

"What happened, Subutai?" someone cried. "Where's Norbo?"

"That was an unnecessary and reckless deed," growled Temuru, concealing his gleaming eyes.

"Let him say what occurred," said Ubasha Khan.

Subutai flushed and told in a halting way what had happened, and what had been said. The contracting river ice twanged and boomed more often. The night was becoming bitterly cold. Even the crackling flames seemed only spears of ice shattering on the cold metal sky. When Subutai had finished his story, Ubasha said:

"No one shall go there to speak—they can't be trusted!"

"Then surely," said Temuru, "you won't let Subutai, merely a boy, fight such a chief as Beran."

But the khan was looking at Subutai's tall erect body and at his lean eager face.

"He's no longer a boy," said Ubasha at last. "He has done well. Let him fight Beran."

"However you say," growled Temuru.

Batu, who had been examining Subutai's coat where the sheepskin had been smudged and torn somehow, now poked his finger through a hole.

"You've been shot," he said.

Subutai reached inside the fold of his kalat, a curious

expression on his face. He found a cold bullet lodged against his flesh. He looked at the bullet, and then he threw it into the fire, showing his white teeth as he laughed, looking back at the distant fort gleaming like quicksilver under the moon again.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The morning air was intensely cold and clear. But in the east a bank of clouds, like an iron shield concealing the rising sun, let only a crimson chill of dawn fall from over its edge. Such light gave a curiously stained and leaning air to the fort, the small dark figures along the walls, and even the level ground.

Batu, who had been awake for some time, roused Subutai when he saw smoke beginning to climb in tall pillars from morning fires in the fort. Subutai rubbed his eyes sleepily and then he woke with a start. His white Bar-Kul mare stirred near-by ; her winter hair, lathery as milk in last night's moon, was covered with ice that broke like little bells when she moved. Subutai leaped to his feet and tossed his long sheepskin cloak to the ground. Batu had brought a Torgut breastplate, made of cowhide and laced with strips of iron, backless, according to Torgut tradition, to keep its bearer from fleeing in battle. Together, Batu and Subutai began tying the leather thongs of the armour securely.

Other men, waking, came to watch and offer suggestions. These men had different opinions about the Kirghiz chieftain's armour, some maintaining that it was soft as butter, while others claimed it was magically immune to any attack ; and they had correspondingly different ideas how Subutai should plan his fight. But Temuru, who had come up, now said :

“ Beran wears chain-armour made by the Kubetshis, and

such stuff is nearly impossible to pierce with a lance—except perhaps in the small of the back, where it has been seamed. Carry your dagger ready, as well as your lance, and let him make the first cast. Then try to grapple him from his horse, and drive your dagger into his back.”

Subutai heard all these things, but he was impatient now to be gone ; and when he sat on his horse, trailing his lance to hear Ubasha and his father wish him well, his muscles ached sorely from the effort to keep them still. But then, hearing a trumpet call from the fort, each note coming like a spear through the cold air, he turned his horse.

The timbered gates of Koulagina were swung open ; the silver-clad figure of the Kirghiz chief appeared.

Subutai drew a deep breath, and for a moment he gazed at the besieging circle of Torgut troops. Here and there, light shone somehow on muskets and lances so that they seemed like the whips of willow wood used at the summer racing. And for a moment he recalled the pennons in the summer breeze, the murmur and laughter of the elders and women at Ubasha's pavilion, the sky rising like a blue bubble above the earth ; and then he recalled how, uneasy and restless to start, he had found a silk red bow concealed in his pony's mane, like a magic charm. Now, too, like a token, came thought of Cedar-chab to help him win.

A thunderous shout rose behind him. His knees gripped at his horse, and cold air crackled against his face. He rode with his lance trailing a little and his dagger clutched at his side. Beran came charging from the foot of the slope. Even at a distance, Subutai seemed minutely able to see the arrogant unblinking eyes of Beran, to hear the soft whistling breath of his enemy's horse. Subutai lodged his legs against the ribs of his own white mare and leaned back, poising his lance, leaning out on the side where Beran would pass. As they came rushing together, Subutai could see the man's eyes, fixed on his Torgut breastplate, the dark glittering point of a Persian lance, the man's

lips, tight against his white teeth as he poised for the throw.

But with a whistling of wind, they had passed one another and neither had thrown. Not far distant from the slope of the fort, Subutai turned. He could see Beran, far across the snow, his armour gleaming in a silver light against the dark background of besiegers and trees. He thought, this time he must make the Kirghiz cast and miss. Shouts rose, from the fort and from the distant circle of men ; and, as though carried on the crests of these conflicting waves of sound, the warriors charged toward one another again.

Subutai leaned forward, tickling his mare's ear with the point of his knife. He raced in a straight line of attack, making it appear they would pass just as before, to the right of each other. Keeping his body still somewhat forward, he poised his lance.

A cold moisture had formed on his palm, and he twirled the shaft in his hand.

They were apart, perhaps less than fifteen strides, when Beran's body and arm began to move, making his throw. But Subutai's manœuvre was fairly timed, cutting suddenly and sharply in front of the Kirghiz chief. Beran was unable to halt his cast, the shaft was already slipping from his hand; he could only swing more widely and change his aim. As for Subutai's lance, thrown with a grunt, it scraped his enemy's metal-clad arm and fell beyond in the snow. And the iron point of Beran's lance, despite loss of speed and deflected aim, rang with a dull and buried thud against Subutai's chest.

The Torguts groaned, seeing Subutai almost knocked from his horse by the blow. Beran's lance was caught in his chest, quivering violently. And from the fort there came a mighty shout, cheering the Kirghiz Beran—who scowled bitterly at the men on the walls. For Subutai, now all could see, was unharmed. The point of Beran's lance had wedged itself not in his chest but tightly between a

strip of iron and the tough cowhide of his buckler. And when he tugged at the shaft and the point came free, then a Torgut shout rolled over the field in the wake of their premature groan, and the Cossacks and Kirghiz in the fort became silent and glum.

Beran spurred his horse over the snow to where Subutai's lance had fallen, leaning far out of his saddle. He clutched at the shaft ; but it was frozen to the snow, and his fingers came free with nothing but crystals of ice. Subutai came charging on him, shouting wildly. Beran swung into a crouching position and rode his horse madly over the snow.

Subutai followed, shouting fiercely, spurring his horse to cut off Beran's flight toward the gate of the fort, making short jabbing thrusts in the air with his enemy's lance.

Beran was demoralized completely when his horse, strong but ponderous, made a misstep at the foot of the slope ; he stumbled and almost fell, with Subutai near, so that Beran drew his dagger and jabbed madly at his flank ; and the poor beast, shrieking with terror, began to race along the foot of the slope.

From the wall of the fort men looked down, Cossacks and Kirghiz alike, and saw Beran fleeing abjectly before the young Torgut. Some of them shouted, with faint hope, "Turn, Beran—grapple him with your dagger !" But many of them were glad of a chance to deride the arrogant chieftain.

Subutai shouted, too, exhorting his enemy to turn and fight with knives ; he withheld his throw, enjoying the humiliation of Beran under the Cossack walls.

"Ya-bonnah !" he cried. "Coward, dog !"

The Kirghiz chief, in panic, drove his horse harder.

When they had nearly circled the fort, Beran tried to cut abruptly up the slope to the gate. But on the hillside here, where the snow was trampled, there were rocks, and ice under the snow. Half-way up to the timbered gate, his horse slipped and fell and turned over, leaving Beran to

roll there in the snow with his Persian helmet gone from his head.

Now from the fort came not only yells of derision but shouts of bitter laughter. For Beran, sitting up in the snow, rubbing the snow from his eyes, rising gingerly with a ball of snow caught on his dagger, was a comical sight. Even Subutai, sitting his white horse, smiled.

All Subutai's wild lust for vengeance, for death to Beran, was gone, seeing Beran with his black hair tousled over his abject eyes, his dagger muffled in the snow, like any ordinary man who has taken an abrupt fall. With a playful but wary gesture, Subutai struck with his lance at Beran's dagger hand. The ball of snow burst in the silver air; the dagger, like a streak of light, flew through the snow-dust. The men in the fort laughed uproariously, and Subutai smiled again.

"Now I shall have the Torgut warrior Norbo," he said to Beran, "and his horse, and your horse and armour as well. And tell your khan Nurali that should he send men against us they won't return, like you, with their lives intact."

Crestfallen, the vanquished Beran passed through the gates of the fort. The Kirghiz warriors scowled darkly at their conquered chief, muttering words of shame. The Cossacks cheered Subutai and delivered Norbo into his hands.

Even the commander, who had watched the combat, came to the gate and shook Subutai's hand.

"You're really very good fellows," he said, his moustache wreathed in steam from his puffing breath. "Now why don't you all go home in peace?"

"Peace?" said Subutai, speaking more confidently than the night before. "Your Tsarina and her forts make a one-sided peace. . . . We go in peace—but our own way."

"Then it's true," the commander said, stroking his beard, "your people are on the move."

"There's no harm in your knowing," said Subutai ; "you'll learn soon enough, from Jenat."

"And what's the meaning of all this?" said the commander, gesturing toward the besiegers. "Is this your idea of peace?"

"We mean no harm," said Subutai ; "only that you can't prevent our people from crossing the River Jaik."

"Nonsense, it's absurd!" said the commander. "You can't run away like this. You'll go back where you belong—and lucky if you aren't worse off than before!"

"Never."

"And if not," said the commander, "it's too bad—for your people will be ground to bits!"

"As it may be," said Subutai, shrugging. "May I go now?"

"Go in peace," said the commander.

And down the hill from the fort rode Subutai, leading Beran's horse laden with his Persian armour, and with Norbo riding at his side. Norbo's excited and grateful chatter made Subutai forget the threatening undertone of the commander's remarks. His chest heaved with emotion. What would Cedar-chab say, if she could see him thus, returning in triumph? Deeply he breathed the intoxicating silver air, in which there seemed a faint taste of frosty snow, riding back to the Torgut troops. . . .

That night great fires were built, lighting, like a smoky cave, the lowering sky. During the day it had grown imperceptibly warmer, until by dusk the breath of men and animals, although still vaporizing in the air, formed less clear and white-like puffs of smoke than in the bitter cold of dawn. Ubasha had flasks of arrack rationed to the men, and there was much singing and laughter.

At one of the fires, Norbo recounted for the tenth time his adventures in the fort—how he had been quartered with the Kirghiz on the earthen floor of the wooden church ; how Beran's fat little companion had bound him so tight

he couldn't sleep, and secured him by thongs to his own belt ; and how in retaliation he thrust his knees into the man's belly all night, so that his captor likewise might have no sleep.

" But I tell you," said Norbo, " it was pretty bad, lying there, because these Kirghiz dogs have no laws about doing their business in a dwelling."

" Perhaps in a Russian temple," Batu suggested, " nothing dwells, not even their god."

" I can tell you one thing," Norbo said, " the odours dwelled there all right. And even myself, look—they gave me no chance to water, and left me bound. Finally I couldn't hold out a moment longer, I thought I'd burst—so I simply rolled over against my man and let go !"

The men howled with laughter, although they had heard this nine times before, and then they paused expectantly for what they knew came next.

" But it was all the worse for me," Norbo said mournfully. " Why, when I got back here I had to stand near the fire nearly an hour before I came unfrozen from my clothes. . . . Deliver me from the Kirghiz—I'd rather be massacred by the Turks !"

By the great crackling fires, the men drank arrack and laughed. Then Batu said he was going to make a song about Subutai, as soon as he could think of the proper words. Already a somewhat legendary idea was growing about Subutai's invulnerability ; first there was the bullet last night, which had lodged like a token against his chest, and then there was Beran's lance which had, so to speak, turned in mid-air against its own master. . . . The men recalled all manner of legend and song ; and so, accompanied by the wind blowing through snow-muted trees of the near-by forest, Batu and then other men recounted and sang these things.

Some of the tales were of Kutlah Khan, an extremely ancient hero, whose voice was thunder, whose hands were

bear-paws, who could break a man like an arrow. There were songs of many heroes and wars. But best of all, the men liked the legend of the greatest hero who ever lived, the Bogdo Ghessur Khan.

Batu told how the Bogdo was born for the destruction of all the evil on earth, and how he began by conquering Mangoucha, a great spirit of evil. But the Bogdo was ensnared by his enemy's wife, and with her he dallied in Mangoucha's palaces of gold. In the meantime, evil rose in all parts of the world again. Then the Bogdo woke from enchantment and became truly sublime.

"His sword increased to the length of 1500 fathoms," chanted Batu, "and he cut down 600 enemies at each stroke of his terrible blade. He destroyed 33,000,000 people of evil, in all, before he had cleansed the earth," Batu sang. And the other men joined :

" Oh the great, the terrible Bogdo
with his black bay courser.
From his body and under his feet
coming sparks.
His face burning with star fire,
the paradise plume on his helmet
a rainbow surrounds.
Sparkle the seven rare stones
on his coat of mail
like the moon and the sun.
Oh, the great Bogdo,
Ghessur, the terrible,
Khan of all khans."

When they had finished, the wind was blowing a low empty note through the cold trees, as though nothing but hollow sound were left in the Bogdo's wake, making them think of death. An argument, muffled as though in fear of the sighing trees, sprang up around the fire. The men drew closer to the crackling flames and talked of where a man went after life.

Batu looked all around and said in a mysterious whisper :

"Bagha the shaman once told me that our people at first believed there was nothing more after death than after a fire had burned. But this was wrong—otherwise what good would it be to obey all the laws, if all men were the same in death? And so Khan Tengri saw this was a mistake, and he created a sea of filth. Here the dead are brought; and across the sea is the White Palace shining like the sun, with an iron path leading across. In the palace are gongs that draw the dead over the path. The guilty are blinded, gongs clash in their heads, and they fall for ever into the sea of filth."

Tuluku, a Buddhist, spoke up:

"That's all right for you," he said, "but some of us think like the lamas—that after death you float around until they find another body for you; and if you obeyed the laws it's a better body, and if you didn't, it's perhaps a jackal you become."

"Then many of your friends," said Batu, "must be Kirghiz by now. Also, I notice for a Buddhist you always eat your full share of meat, isn't it so?"

Norbo joined in, saying:

"The Lama Loosang, there's a Buddhist for you—nobody can down a whole sheep fast as he, unless maybe it's Gedesu. How do you explain that, Tuluku?"

"Why, it's quite simple," said Tuluku. "Why, the law about not eating meat. . . . You see, in one place, say in Tibet—yes, the Dalai Lama for instance—none of those people would eat meat because, being the very highest place on earth, only the best of souls being punished as cattle and animals are found there, and they must be saved. Whereas here among us, don't you see, it's a different thing. This is low country, only the worst souls are among our cattle and sheep. Yes, if a man is so bad as all that, he deserves to be eaten!"

Several of the men laughed, looking over their shoulders at the dark forest beyond the dwindling glow of the fire.

But Norbo spoke up in a bold voice, defiant of the dark night and all it might contain.

"It's all a lot of superstition," he said. "There's nothing after death ; I can tell you that, I've been close enough to it, myself ; isn't it so, Subutai ? . . . Come to think of it, there's not much to life, either, unless you disobey all the laws, like Gedesu. Why, the Russians have an idea you go to heaven stretched out like a carcass on two sticks of wood—and that's the way most people get it, gutted and nailed down. Isn't it so, Subutai ? What do you think ?"

All looked at Subutai, who had said little. Now in a quiet voice he said, smiling :

"My father Temuru once told me to respect all religions, for in this way a man may surely make himself agreeable to God."

The others smiled and murmured assent, and Subutai said :

"Beyond that, I only know a wise man once said we were all travellers here on earth ; and whatever a man's path may be, he must travel it to the end."

The men nodded solemnly, feeling that Subutai had spoken well.

Talk passed to the magical powers of holy men, with Tuluku telling of what certain Buddhist lamas and koubil-gans could do—to which Batu replied by recounting the supernatural exploits of Shamanist wizards.

Subutai soon rose from the fire and walked away, to clear his head from the arrack fumes and the smoke. He breathed great deep draughts of the cold snowy wind. Yes, it was really snowing, he found—great white flakes were falling. It made him think of snow on another night, and Cedar-chab. He lifted his head and looked at the thick forest, the old snow clinging to trunks and needles, so silent and dark ; and then he raised his face and looked up where the wind pushed through the pine-tops with a tone hollow as death. All around were forces darker than the trees,

more intangible than the wind, all greater than he. Well, and if he came to nothing himself, thought Subutai, a man must still follow the path he chose to the end. Thus he stood, with his face lifted to the falling snow, for a long time. And then slowly he turned and made his way back to the fire, where now, in postures of sleep, his comrades lay snoring loudly ; and there he slept.

CHAPTER EIGHT



For three more days and nights the Torgut troops besieged the Russian fortress of Koulagina.

During this time it snowed sporadically. Each morning the old men, like Khoochin, would raise their faces to the sky, sniff, would strike their bony legs like rheumatic tuning-forks, shake their heads solemnly, and would report that a great blizzard was on the way.

The rather scant rations which the men had brought were eaten sparingly. The dogs were constantly running over the snow and up to the walls of the fort, sniffing and searching near the walls for refuse. And whenever men went apart from their fellows, the dogs trotted along and waited, at a respectful distance, while human haunches were bared. The sturdy horses ate the snow, churning it to slush in their jaws and letting it trickle down their short throats. Several times men primed their muzzle-loaders and shot at carrion crows, but aside from this, there was no shooting. The men in the fort merely guarded the walls and threw snow-balls at the hungry dogs, keeping a sharp eye on their besiegers all the while.

During the day the Torguts rode back and forth at the far edge of the clearing. Sometimes a group would gallop across the eastern plain until they could no longer be seen. Then they swung into the north, crossing the untrodden Orenburg Road, returning at a brisk trot down the river, the hollow chime of the ice muffled from hoof-beats by snow ; and then they would swarm up the river-bank

below the fort with a great shout as though they had circumnavigated the globe itself. Others would go into the forest ; and there, among the dark quiet trees, continually startled by blobs of snow falling from suddenly bending limbs, they would shout to one another for reassurance ; and axe blows would ring out in the still air.

The fires were kept going quietly in the day, while men slept who had done picket duty the night before ; but great stacks of wood were assembled for the crackling pyres the men required after dark. As the dusk came each night, a ring of flames burst on all sides of the fort, colouring with a ruddy glow the snow-flurried air ; and the men clustered near the fires thick as swarming insects, casting gigantic shadows into the smoky air.

One night Ubasha, who, with the older men, had a fire apart from the rest, invited some of the younger men, including Subutai, to join them for tea and talk.

A large copper pot, which had been steaming near the fire fragrantly, was passed around when the tea had been cooled sufficiently to drink.

Arrack had been good, but this was better. It was not ordinary brick tea such as most people drank, bitter and thick with bloated millet. Flavoured faintly with butter—which Ubasha seemed to have conjured out of the snow that melted like white froth in the brew—it was a rare and delicate blend of leaves from the finest tea-slopes of far-away China.

The men passed the stimulating pot, smacking their lips in content. Talk ensued, with the younger men deferring politely to their elders and to Ubasha, who was in an extremely unpleasant and informative mood.

Talk got round to the origin of their people ; and Khoochin, clawing his thin beard, told the Kirghiz legend of the red dog and the forty maidens of the lake, Issyk Kul.

“ That was the start of the Kirghiz dogs,” he said, cackling and peering around.

"Such things are stories," said Ubasha, smiling. "In such matters, we have the writings of many wise men. Probably we all come from one family, in the beginning of the world—just as in a family, one son will become lean and another fat. But as to the beginnings of our own people, we find many clues in the *Djungariade*, which we all know, and in the writing of the Saissang Setzen and others."

He paused. Deferentially, he nodded to the older men as he reached for the copper pot. The men, knowing that Ubasha was nearly as learned as a lama, urged him to continue. But with a self-deprecating gesture he turned to Choktu.

"What this one knows," he said, "is only one. Others know more. Choktu knows many things—let him say. . . ."

All the men turned expectantly toward Choktu.

The Saissang Choktu was a mild-mannered man, a good warrior, well-travelled, given to much study. His mother had been sister to the great Galdan Tseren, and through her he had inherited all the books of the last Djungarian khan—a library so vast at one time that, according to rumour, two hundred camels had been required to transport it from place to place. Choktu had come, after the death of Galdan Tseren in 1745, with many of these books and with two hundred yurts, a young man then, to join the Volga Torguts. He was a Darkan Saissang, a man of family as well as of rank. His name was inscribed in the Mongol Census, kept according to the Regulations of 1640, as a prince of the house of Genghis Khan. And his name was likewise written in the Almanac of Peking.

Now he leaned back and partially closed his eyes, squinting at the flames; and the men settled comfortably to listen.

"In the beginning, then," Choktu said in a far-away voice, "were the Mongol people and they covered the plains and valleys and mountains of Asia. They were a

pastoral people, and this was how it was intended. For otherwise would the snows and waters have been deep and clear for drinking, and the grass deep and sweet for grazing ? And they were a warlike people too, and this was also intended. For to the edges of the world clung people, enemies who defiled the grass and the water ; and it was clear they had been placed there to keep us strong."

Choktu went on to speak of the tribal divisions among the Mongols, and of the existence of a khan of all the people—a man of the tribe Kerait or Torgut, the Wang Khan, Tului, known to Europeans as Prester John. The Wang Khan built a city of gold, Khara-khun, and to his court came, among others, a petty chieftain from the north, a man called Temudjin.

" Ah ! " burst softly from the lips of all, when Choktu mentioned this magical name.

The white flakes came fluttering down like moths on the warriors' heads, their furs, burning like fragile wings on the fire. They were completely entranced, paying little attention to the snow and even heeding the tea no longer, so delicately did they fear to move lest they frighten the words coming from Choktu's mouth like birds from some far-off time and land.

Choktu resumed, telling how the Wang Khan befriended Temudjin and helped him win back the lands of his people from the warring tribes of the north, the Khalkha Mongols. And then he told how the Wang Khan himself was beset by ill fortune, and went in despair to Temudjin. To the northern chieftain, Tului promised his youngest daughter ; and Temudjin helped the Wang Khan win back his lands and his people. But then once again Temudjin was beset by trouble from warring tribes, and he wrote to the Wang Khan for help. Choktu recited the famous letter from Temudjin to Tului :

" " Do you not remember, O khan my father, when in distress you came to me with your body peering out through

tatters like the sun through clouds, and worn out with hunger, how I attacked those who had molested you? You came to me haggard—and in half-a-moon you were stout and well-favoured again.' ”

The Wang Khan, said Choktu, never answered his friend's letter. But Temudjin became stronger than ever before ; and he still wanted honour from Tului and sons from the Wang Khan's daughter, and these things were refused, for Tului feared the strength of this young khan in the north. And finally Temudjin came south in his wrath and destroyed the Wang Khan himself, and all his sons and wives and concubines, saving only the youngest daughter ; and with her the conqueror Temudjin begot the fathers of Ubasha Khan's house and our own, said Choktu ; and with her he dallied long, in the golden palaces of Khara-Khun.

But then, said Choktu, word came from the edges of the world that evil had risen again, and Temudjin awoke. He roared like a lion, and he levelled the corrupt golden city to the ground. For fifteen years he pursued and slew his enemies, until they totalled 33,000,000 in all. He destroyed the dusty cities and gave the land back to the grass and the sun again, said Choktu ; and he begot peace, ruled well, and left the great Yassa of laws, the Bone of the people.

“ Thus then was Tului, first khan of our people. And thus too, burning like the sun, father of our khans and princes, was Temudjin the great Khakhan, the terrible Genghis.”

For a moment there was silence broken only by the crackling of fire and the hissing of snow. Then Subutai cleared his throat and leaned forward deferentially.

“ It is a curious thing,” he said, “ how similar this story is to the legend of the Bogdo Ghessur Khan which we heard last night. Might some wise one enlighten me, are these heroes the same ? ”

“ Likely enough,” said Ubasha, puffing his pipe. “ Fo-

history is a legend kept by the priests and the princes, while a legend is a thing of the people. And it happens that many things are written of Genghis in history, and of other great princes and rulers, which are not good for the people. And so the people, in their legends, make only what they like of the heroes."

"Or in the legends," grunted Temuru, "you might say only those things are retained that the people will like."

"Yet there was much to like in Temudjin," said Ubasha, "although little enough in his descendants until more or less recent times."

The men murmured approval, seeking new and more comfortable positions. Some held their steaming boots toward the heat, leaning on their elbows, with their head-gear pulled down rakishly over their eyes. Others sat cross-legged, puffing their pipes, with their caps pushed back so that the firelight, quivering on their foreheads, seemed like thought glowing through bone and skin.

Choktu resumed talking, and he spoke of Jagatai and Ogatai, the sons of Genghis, and of his grandsons Khalagu and Khubilai. Then a degeneracy set in among Temudjin's descendants, even as the Khakhan had foretold that it would.

"Thus the Yassa, the Great Bone, was neglected, and the people lost shape," said Choktu, "even as the land loses shape when the rain is in neglect and when the grains of dust can blow hither and thither at will."

The descendants of Genghis were driven from China. They fled back to Mongolia, where the tribes warred among themselves for many cycles of time, until the days of Batur. This ruler, the first great Djungarian since the Wang Khan, was a descendant of Temudjin and Tului's daughter. He succeeded in federating all the Mongol peoples except the Northern or Khalka Mongols."

"This was done under the Regulations of 1640," said Choktu, "our Bichik, the Holy Book which took the place

of the Yassa ; its laws are less strict than those of the Great Bone, but much more timely."

At about the same time, the Manchu tribes conquered China under the great-grandfather of the present khan, said Choktu. For political reasons, this Manchu khan of the Chinese set the Northern Mongols against their brothers of the Oirat or People's Federation. None the less, the Djungarian rulership spread more widely than ever. One grandson of Batur conquered Tibet and placed the Dalai Lama of the Yellow Hats above the corrupt lamas of the Red Hat. And another grandson, Tsevan Araptan, a great man, begot the greatest Djungarian ruler of all, Galdan Tseren. Under the rule of Galdan, the tribes and people of all central Asia were brought together—the people of Khokand and Samarkhand and Tashkent, even as in the days of Temudjin.

"Our Djungarian law was brought to the very gates of Peking," said Choktu, "and this was in my own time, and I remember . . ."

He stared into the fire. After a pause, he told how as a young man he had accompanied Galdan to the siege of the Manchu stronghold. But word came of trouble at home, and the besiegers had to return. Galdan soon settled the trouble, which was between his grandson Amursana and the ruler of Tibet, who was his nephew ; but then came a Chinese army, sent by the young Manchu ruler of China, Kien Lung, the present khan of the Chinese, said Choktu. These troops Galdan defeated and slaughtered. And then, when all seemed well, the great Djungar fell in battle with the Khalka Mongols over a petty quarrel.

"This was really the end," said Choktu, "for then, the Chinese khan seized our land and set Amursana in the place of the dead Galdan. This was in 1745, and I could no longer live in such a land, under an alien khan like Kien Lung, and I came here to the Volga Horde."

"I well remember the day you arrived," said Temuru,

smiling. "It was near Bish-Uba on a day of the summer races ; and all us hot-blooded young fellows wanted to start off for China to fight the Manchu khan."

"But may I ask," Subutai said deferentially, "how came our people to be here in Russia, when Djungaria was one time our home?"

"It wasn't Russia then," growled Temuru, "just as Djungaria wasn't China in the old days."

"Yes, but before our people came to the Volga," said Ubasha, "they came first to the lands which lie between the Emba and the Aral Sea, toward which we travel now."

"But why did we leave Djungaria?" said Subutai.

"Why, for pasture-lands!" Temuru said, scowling. "That's the only reason people move about—even a child should know that!"

"But we have left good pasture-land near the Volga," Subutai said. "I thought we were seeking freedom."

"So we are," said Ubasha. "We had pastures in Russia, but no freedom. Our ancestors had no pasture-lands, for Djungaria was too thickly peopled ; and without sufficient land for grazing his herds, no man has freedom. Even if a man be free but without herds, is he truly free?"

"So you mean to say," Khoochin broke in, "that it is a bad thing for men to own their own herds?"

"It is good, if all men own herds," said Ubasha. "But if others have none, then they cannot long remain free, since they will have to work for some other man's herds."

"Or fight," said Temuru gruffly.

"So it is with the land," continued Ubasha, "which no man owns. One time our people owned their herds in common, and all but the captured foreign slaves were truly free. To-day our people still hold their lands in common, although some speak for the division of lands, just as the herds were divided. This is bad, I think—because then a man who owned herds but no land, might cease to be free. Just as when our people were told, by Kichinskoi, that the

lands we lived on belonged to the Tsarina—and for this reason a heavier tax was taken each year—so then as a people we ceased to be free.”

“But now,” said Subutai, “we are free——”

“Without lands,” Choktu said with a dry smile. “So it has been written—our people before us sought a place for themselves, under the Khan Ho-Orluk. From Djungaria they came to the lands of Central Asia, where there was little pasture. Here the people had lived for long in cities, before Genghis, and after Genghis had gone. These people destroyed the grass, and they planted great gardens wherever the rain would fall. They planted wherever the rivers came, and they overflowed their gardens by art. Thus the waters were not rightly used, and the rivers disappeared like sighs into the hot earth, where these people lived. Through these dry lands came Ho-Orluk, leading our people to the pastures near the Aral Sea. Then more people came from our old homeland, and together they all went to the larger lands near the Volga, where the Golden Horde once lived. The Turks and the Krim khans had slaughtered the people of the Golden Horde, and the Russ had destroyed Serai.”

“Now called Saratov,” said Ubasha, “and there I have seen the ruins.”

“In the new lands near the Volga,” said Choktu, “the Torguts lived freely, and defeated the Turks. Ho-Orluk’s grandson, the great khan, Ayouka, was visited as an equal by the Russian Tsar. And also, as to an equal sovereign, came emissaries from the Chinese khan. The Russ wanted the Torguts to fight the Turks and the Kirghiz, and the Chinese wanted Ayouka’s people to fight the Russ.”

“Yes,” said Ubasha, more forcibly than usual, not smiling now. “And all that our people wanted then, as now, was peace and freedom in their lands. But then, as now, the powers of the Manchu khan and the Russian Tsar were greedy and growing fast, and they were in conflict then as

now. We are caught between them, and we cannot fight them both or their alien ways. All we seek is a free place, somewhere between, where we can live in peace with our herds."

The men murmured in agreement, staring into the crackling fire where the snow hissed as it fell. A sentry came riding out of the dark night, covered with white flakes.

"The snow is coming deeper," he said, "and the wind is beginning a little. The men are worried lest we be trapped in a storm. May we know what to do?"

Ubasha looked up. He brushed a hand over his eyes and gazed at the melting flakes caught from his eyebrows. He murmured:

"Time enough, soon.. Soon—before dawn, when the moon is high."

The sentry scratched his ear, shook his head vaguely, and rode away. Moon, he thought dubiously—what moon could there be in the snow? But he looked upward and was surprised to find great holes in the sky, chasms among the clouds with their sheer walls glistening like glacial fissures from the night-light of the moon somewhere beyond. Ah, how could he be so wise, their khan? thought the sentry, scratching his ear again and riding on.

"Yes," said Temuru at last, "there are no two ways about it—to gain peace we must fight."

"So speaks Temuru," said Ubasha with a fond smile, but with a sharp and alert look in his eyes, "who believes the world was created for fighting—which he enjoys more than a good joint of meat."

Another man, Rabdan the nephew of Choktu, raised his eyes and said:

"Perchance such a land for us is the home of our people, Djungaria, which is now unpeopled."

Ubasha made an abrupt gesture.

"Djungaria is the grave of our people," he said harshly.

"Tell us, O Choktu, what has become of our homeland in the mountains of Tien Shan."

Choktu spat into the fire and said :

"The end was written in Galdan's death. . . . After the Manchu khan of the Chinese conquered our land, he placed over us the disloyal grandson of Galdan, Amursana, the puppet khan. But when the Manchu troops had gone, Amursana became bold, and he and the Prince Chereng defied the Chinese khan. They were promised aid from the Russ. But none came. And vast armies of Manchu and Chinese troops then came. And they slaughtered all our Torgut people who lived in Djungaria—old men and women, mothers, babies, men—five hundred thousand in all. The blood of our people flowed in the Ili River, down from the Tien Shan pasture-lands to the Lake Balkasch, and none were left living save those who fled. And our country was left silent and lifeless as on the day when Khan Tengri first raised our mountains and valleys from out of the water of the world."

There was great silence when Choktu had done. Only the fire-brands crackled like angry thoughts, only the snow hissed like bitterness in the flames. All faces were stern and flushed.

"Such, then, is Djungaria," said Ubasha Khan harshly. "A land without people, but no longer our land. . . . Would it be any better to live as slaves of the Chinese khan than as the Tsarina's serfs?"

"Perchance," said Rabdan, staring with fiery eyes at the flames, "perchance we could fight and regain our land."

"Perchance," Ubasha said dryly, "we shall have to fight for free pastures and peace wherever we find land for our people. But such land may be near the Emba and Aral Sea. Such land may lie somewhere between here and our lost homeland. Our people are many, the distance to China is great. There are grassless deserts without water

between. We must find land for our people as soon as we can. We must travel in peace among the savage tribes, so far as may be. Let us not be foolish leaders, dragging our people toward a distant dream—for our suffering will be much as it is. Let us not waste our men and our strength by useless war wherever we pass. Let us come to what pastures we will. And then, perchance, to secure freedom and peace we may properly fight, if need be. . . . And now," he said, "let us go!—for the skies are no longer snowing, and the moon is clear."

The men rose from their places near the fire, stretching their cramped limbs. Khoochin stood with his old knees bent and a curious look on his face, as though listening to something that nobody else could hear. Gingerly he moved one leg and then another, grotesquely. He tapped one knee-bone and then another, and the baffled look on his face changed slowly to one of knowledge.

"There is a great storm coming," he said, "there is wind and snow coming soon."

But nobody paid attention to Khoochin.

Trumpets were blowing, and commands flew around the great circle of siege, sweeping in a wide arc around the fort to the frozen river-side in the north. Fires began to die down, and their coals no longer seemed to glow but only to be cold objects luminously coloured by moonlight. And in the moonlight, too, the walls of the fort, the silent towers, seemed like enchanted silver again. The brass cannon, gleaming in the night, was fondly and carefully harnessed to a team of four Turkish horses, its muzzle pointing toward Koulagina. One man stood behind it, with a longing look at the fort—he made a gesture of flint to touch-hole, saying, "Boom!" But his comrades laughed, packing the unused powder and balls, while the team pawed impatiently at the snow. Men tested their girths and stirrups, and those who had neither saddle nor stirrups saw to their blanket packs and cow-hide reins. Muskets were slung across men's backs.

And all the Torgut warriors were ready to ride before the second trumpet call swept through the air.

Now from the north came troops in a wide circle, gaining momentum as others swung in behind when they passed. The dogs swept eagerly from the forest edge, from under the horses where they had been sheltering, from nuzzling around the fires now dead, running with long strides, yelping and baying as though in chase. And the rest of the troops swung in, hearing the men far ahead shouting, "Ya-bonnah!" Back through the whole galloping line came the cry, louder now than the baying dogs, down the eastern edge of the dark and silent forest, growing fainter, a baying and shouting now muffled by snow-covered trees, and only the trodden ground jarring more and more faintly in the clearing where but a moment before they had been, and where, now, only the moonlight and cloud-shadows lay on the snow. . . .

The six thousand warriors rode swiftly and eagerly in the moonlit night, glad to be on the move again. But before dawn, just as Khoochin had foretold, a blizzard began. By morning, only a thin pallor came through the stinging wind. Here and there a ravine, a rise of ground could occasionally be found to shield their passage from the blizzard now raging full force. Men and horses alike became crusted with blown snow that froze in crystal patterns like frost. And as the day drew along, with the storm showing no signs of letting up, the men ceased trying to talk with one another as they rode, except to shout from one body of troops ahead to another, once in a while, to maintain contact.

Late in the day, when the dark came prematurely and a small forest along a stream loomed vaguely through the snow, Ubasha gave an order to halt. In the shelter of trees it was still bitterly cold and the wind blew, weaving among the black trunks; but the snow was less, and the very blackness of the trees seemed to lend the air by contrast

a pale but tangible quality. Here the men drank what remained of their melted brick-milk, and Ubasha ordered the last of the arrack to be rationed ; horses and dogs nuzzled at the bases of trees for what grass and moss might be found there under the snow. Soon the order was given and they were all on the move again, travelling slowly but with skill over the dark ground, treacherous with drifts and rocks and ravines.

All the men, through the long second night, thought of their people—children, wives, friends, parents, and old folks, together with all their herds and flocks, all trapped somewhere under the black wind and stinging snow—and the Torgut riders, eager to find the horde, made what haste they could.

Sometime in the middle of the night, an unexplained order came back along the line to halt. Nothing could be heard by the whistling wind ; even the wolves were in shelter to-night. Flints were struck, far ahead, and a few tallow torches were lit and shielded from the wind. A mutter of explanation finally passed back among the waiting men—the troops had come at last, it seemed, on the path where their people had travelled east. . . . When the warriors rode on again, all could feel, beneath the yielding pack of new snow, the frozen slush where the horde had passed.

Although the blizzard was still blinding and black as before, everyone tried to peer ahead and to all sides for signs of life—for tents and carts looming among the tattered clouds of snow, or for the dark massed outline of herds ; they strained their ears to catch through the whistling air a deep lowing of kine or bleating of sheep ; and they strained their cold nostrils, too, for trace of smoke borne on the wind. . . .

The dawn began to silver the darkness, slowly. And now, with heavy hearts, they began to find objects mounded with snow. Here was a broken cart, a wind-torn tent, covered with soft folds of snow, or a battered chest ; and there, a score of cattle stood frozen and shrouded like snow

images of themselves, belly deep in the white barrens ; and here right underfoot, known with fearful certainty, were the rigid lumps of their own human dead.

The trail of anguish and death, softened a little by snow, led ahead. The Torgut troop, returning from Koulagina and dreams of glory, rode through the raging blizzard with lowered heads and tightened lips. The wind howled from the unknown places of the earth, and the snow particles blew like hosts of death.

CHAPTER NINE



Until the blizzard struck, the Torgut horde had been steadily on the move, making excellent distances each day.

Prince Bambar, commanding the migration in the khan's absence, was worried about the unknown riders whose tracks the horde had crossed ; he felt certain that a large force of Cossacks lurked somewhere in the south. Zebek and Chereng discounted any such danger ; they counselled slower travel, now that Ubasha was besieging Koulagina.

Beyond the Jaik River, the people began to straggle and mutter. Since they were out of reach of the Russian forts, many felt that they could afford to take it easy. Zebek's advice—which everyone learned about, somehow—seemed wise and considerate. They were tired and cold and hungry ; long hard travel each day caused many deaths among the old people and the very young, and among the animals too. The people straggled and muttered against Bambar's stubborn demand for haste.

But Bambar thought that if the lands beyond the Emba River were his people's goal, then without question they should maintain a fast march while the weather remained clear, to reach the Emba in the shortest time possible. Each morning the trumpets were blown before dawn and the priests intoned their mantras to the sun, long before it had risen. And when the sun rose cold in a cloudless sky, the level plain stretched covered with snow to the endless horizons like a vast sea becalmed. Now and then a thin wind blew and barely rippled the frozen undulations over

which the homeless travellers moved. The people complained, and pointed to the monotony of their travel as proof they were safe. But Bambar, now that the moon was approaching the full, each day withheld the order to halt until long after dark.

The great triple column of carts and people and animals had sprawled out and lengthened again, until it was nearly forty miles from the advance troops, commanded by Momotubash, back to the rearguard where Bambar rode. Yet no matter how the horde tried to straggle and loiter, the troops in the rear kept relentlessly prodding the laggard hoshuns and aimaks. . . . Bambar refused to call a halt at night until he himself was able to make camp on the same spot where Momotubash had encamped the night before.

And so the Torgut horde, despite all grumbling, moved ahead by its own length each day.

The fourth day after crossing the Jaik River was eventless ; but on the fifth day, like a startling demonstration of the need for haste and caution, a large body of Cossack troops suddenly appeared on the extreme southern flank of the horde.

These were the riders whose path the Torguts had crossed in the lands west of the Jaik. Under the Starshin Mitrasoff, they had left Koulagina for the Caspian winter fisheries. But, as Bambar had suspected, they had been paralleling the movement of the horde. Perhaps they had noticed the vast clouds of snow-dust that overhung the migrating Torguts. At any rate, these two thousand soldiers had been lurking along, just out of sight of Zebek's southern flank, for several days. The Starshin Mitrasoff, discovering the vast extent of the Torgut movement, had no desire to attack such a body of people with his two thousand men. But he kept a careful watch ; and when the two small uluses of Yeka Zhookhor and Erket, under the petty princes Assarko and Mashi, straggled away from the main body of the southern flank, the Cossacks appeared.

No fighting occurred, although some of Zebek's scouts witnessed the capture of the two uluses ; but when they dashed forward in search of Zebek, he shrugged and said it was too late to do anything, anyway—and that Ubasha had counselled the horde to travel in peace ; and that moreover, the two lost uluses had been lukewarm about the migration from the very start.

A rumour spread among the Torgut people, that Assarko and Mashi had been hoping for the Cossacks to appear, so that the Starshin Mitrasoff might convoy themselves and their people back to the Volga lands. But most of the Torguts felt that, no matter what, the two small uluses had been captured because of their own lethargy and carelessness.

And now they all determined to press on toward the Emba as fast as possible, needing Bambar's urging no longer. The horde travelled at a steady march for long hours each day with little complaint. The people no longer felt safe from the Tsarina's troops ; they moved ahead with a dogged hope that soon they would reach the Emba, where they might find relief from hunger and weariness and death. Each night more people died, and were left behind in the dawn with animals that had foundered, carts that had broken, and heavy household goods, such as chests and festival pots, which were jettisoned to lighten the over-laden animals and carts. Each dawn, it seemed impossible to move on once more. Even the carts, it seemed, suffered from their ceaseless grinding over the snow, so that at dawn the wooden wheels stuck reluctantly, and the axles creaked and groaned like the stiff joints of beast and man. But none the less each morning, before dawn, the horde began to plod doggedly toward the east again.

On the fifteenth day of the migration it began to snow, lightly at first, with an air of exhilaration, breaking, as it did, the eventless weather of these monotonous days.

People felt that the Emba couldn't be far. Faces became eager again. They had done well, they were nearly in

sight of their goal, all felt ; they had travelled at an almost unprecedented rate, covering nearly five hundred miles from the Volga lands in less than fifteen days ; and all turned their eyes ahead, peering through the snow for sight of the promised land. Laughter, conversation, even songs broke out here and there ; and the animals seemed to quicken, too, frisking and snapping at the great falling flakes.

But then the sky darkened. A cutting wind began to blow, first from the north-west, driving at their backs with heavy snow. For a time they went on. The wind, and with it the snow, began to blow from the south, from all directions, whirling in a thick blizzard over the barren steppe.

The Emba, which everyone had visualized as some momentous goal, was crossed almost without knowledge. Here, not far below its source, the river was like a broad and shallow pool, with low banks and only a few stunted willows in the gloom like ominous birds hunching their wings against the snow. Only occasionally, where the water was deep and the ice not far beneath the snow, did the hollow sound of their crossing inform the Torguts that the river at last had been reached.

On they went, for a short time, but the force of the blizzard gained steadily toward dark. Some of the aimaks lost touch with one another in the raging storm. Carts collided, animals foundered, order became inextricably lost. And here, somewhere between the Emba head-waters and the Aral Sea and the Mugadir hills of the Ural divide, the Torgut horde, tangled in confusion, foundering hopelessly in the blizzard over an area more than fifty miles square, came to a groaning, shattered halt.

Most of the old people remained sitting on carts and horses right where they came to rest, covered thickly with snow, nodding drowsily, completely unable to move. They peered from under frosty eyelids at the able-bodied people and the older children herding the animals, all blurred and confused in the snow. None murmured, for it had always

been so among their people, that the animals, the source of all life, came first ; next came the claim of children, bearers of new life ; last of all came the turn of the old to receive attention, marked with veneration and great respect none the less ; this was how it should be, and the old people sat patiently or drowsed, waiting for camps and fires to be made in the blizzardous dusk.

Grandma refused to sit and wait.

Desperately weary, even though her joints seemed frozen, she got down from her cart, for she had her own cattle and sheep to tend. In the last fluttering light of day, she and Tenek began to herd her animals close to the carts. The cattle lowed piteously, and the sheep bleated with their bald faces bent to avoid the snow. Tenek capered and clucked and wasn't much help ; but Grandma was glad to have him about, even so.

Snow stung her face and blew in between her gloves and sleeves, where it melted and left her bony wrists cold and raw.

When she and Tenek tried to fasten her tent between two carts, the wind ripped the cloth out of her hands, and it blew over the heads of the sheep, bellying and flapping wildly. In another moment it would have been lost. But just then, Yelden and Merghen came through the storm ; luckily they caught it and helped Grandma make it fast and snug, and Yelden even got a mat from one of the carts and spread it under the shelter, pressing it down on the snow. Then they squatted down out of the wind for a moment.

"What a storm, it's terrible !" said Merghen. "So thick you can scarcely see !"

"Yes, and the snow blows right down into your lungs," Yelden said excitedly, "things are terrible—broken carts, blown over, you can't tell a direction ; on top of that, now it's getting dark as night, somebody's sheep ran past——"

"My horse struck one," said Merghen, "nearly broke his leg——"

"But the sheep" said Yelden, "you should have seen the sheep—he lay there bawling in his blood in the snow, the dogs ran up, they began eating him, would you believe it, he was still alive——"

"People too," said Merghen, "I saw three people frozen stiff."

"Everything's lost," Yelden said, sighing.

"No, it's not that," said Merghen. "Here we are, across the Emba at last, everything will straighten out somehow. . . . Look," he said to Grandma, "Gedesu said you're to stay the night with Ghashun."

"What's wrong with him?" Grandma said tartly.

"He's up in front with the big people," Merghen said with a sarcastic smile, "he's talking about big things with Zebek and the others. He calls himself 'temporary saissang,' mind you—and now he says the storm isn't fit for him to come home in."

"No more's the storm fit for me to go out in, looking for Ghashun," said Grandma. "I haven't seen her all day. Let him look to his own."

"Well, he said to tell you."

"But then," said Yelden, "have you seen my wife and animals?"

"Yours are yonder, to the left a little," Grandma said more civilly. "Merghen, don't you be any man's fool—you could look all night and never find Ghashun in this weather! Go help Yelden and stay with him."

"Well, don't say I didn't try," said Merghen, grinning. "Come along, Yelden—it's near black-dark already."

The wind blew more strongly, making the carts sway and creak in the cold, shaking the tents, drowning the cries of animals and the shouts of men returning, like Merghen and Yelden, from the troops ahead. The last light died. Men and horses groped their way in a swirl of snow, stumbling against carts and broken objects, seeking their wives and herds. Many of them gave up—it was too dark and wild a

night. They sought what shelter they could find. Many of them lent a hand to unknown women, after the tradition of such a situation among their people, and then they crept thankfully under the snug tents to lie with these strange women away from the storm.

Ghashun, this night, lay with Vasilov.

For long, now, she had alternately smiled and snarled at the Russian captive. She had taken to wearing a whip tied to her wrist, these days, the way she had once admired in Subutai; and during the day she lashed incessantly at Vasilov with tongue and whip. But at night, while Gedesu munched and chewed noisily inside the tent, she was in the habit of binding the Cossack to the seat of the cart, running her hands over his body, once he was bound, smiling, when she felt the quiver of his roused flesh, flicking him with the whip, laughing uncertainly, and returning to Gedesu. . . .

But to-night, when all had been ordered as well as possible in the storm, she stood with the whip dangling and a sickly smile on her thin lips, standing in the driven snow with one hand on the flap of her tent, looking at Vasilov, whom she had neglected to bind. But when he came closer, she lashed him savagely with the whip. All the while, he stood there with the snow stinging his face, beginning to laugh, the whip cracking harmlessly about his tattered coat, lashing and chipping away the icy crust from his coat. Then she stopped, panting for breath in the whistling wind, her thin lips curving down in anguish. Vasilov laughed; he tore the whip from her wrist, shoving her through the flap of the tent and down in the dark.

Outside the white snow blew and spun on a black wind,

When he had finished, Vasilov shoved her away. He lay nauseated in the dark, listening to the animals out in the storm. How could he have done such a thing? Pah! He spat in her direction, but she made no move. She was

crying to herself, sniffing with her face against the snow-cooled mat. He shrugged. Any hut in a storm—in a desert any water-hole. . . . In the dark, he thought of the bitter turn his life had taken.

It seemed like something from another man's life, to recall the hot tea, the pleasant clink of coopecks on pay day, vodka at Tsaritizin or maybe Sarepta on occasional leave, a summer meeting with a German girl under the star-heavy trees ; even the barrack drill on frosty mornings, or riding away from Jenat on troop manoeuvres, near the Torgut uluses, to impress them with the Tsarina's power ; the semi-annual fairs, spring and fall, all up and down the Volga—what a fine life it had been, really, now it was gone !

The sour odour of his own and Ghashun's bodies, perspiring under their thick and filthy clothes, gradually filled and fouled the air of the tent where they lay. The tent walls bellied in, growing heavy with snow, and the wind howled outside.

Vasilov groaned, sick at heart, recalling that he was a captive of a barbarian people, as he considered them, lost somewhere on the snow-blown steppe north of the Aral Sea. Slave to a fat Torgut, he thought bitterly—stallion to his slack-bellied wife !

" Ah, Little Mother in Petersburg," he whispered, " help me—let me get home again ! "

But the blizzard only howled louder in the night.

" Ach, nobody cares," said Vasilov, " the Tsarina fans herself in front of a Petersburg stove, she eats French ices and listens to German musicians fiddle and blow. . . . Vasilov is alone."

Now he recalled only the arrogant, often drunken and brutal regime of Russian officers at the fort. No wonder the Torguts ran away ! Why, didn't the officers treat the Cossacks themselves nearly as badly ? That was what Pugatchef, a soldier in the fort, used to say, until one day he deserted and hid in a Magyar woman's house. Vasilov

remembered Beketoff, the provincial governor, storming into the fort :

"Where's this rogue, Pugatchef?" he had demanded, roaring at the men. "Had ten lashes coming, eh? Catch him and make it a hundred. What's this French nonsense, anyway, 'all men are equal,' eh? Captain Dudin says that in France they toss 'em in jail. Give 'em an equal taste of the whip, that's fair and square enough! What's the world coming to, anyway?"

Vasilov sighed deeply, recalling this. And then, recalling a talk with Pugatchef in the Magyar woman's house, he thought, "Well, whatever the world comes to, it will be better than this, and better than that!" For Pugatchef, the fanatic, had a plan; and he was making wide furtive trips through the countryside to further this plan. Pugatchef said, "Why shouldn't one of ourselves be Tsar—a soldiers' and peasants' Tsar?" Vasilov's heart beat faster, remembering this. "Ah," he thought, "if the Torguts had only stayed, instead of running away! then we might have joined with them and fought, and made Pugatchef's story come true!"

Outside the wind howled, near him the woman cried silently. He stirred uneasily, and crept to the flap in the tent, thinking of escape. Anything was better than this, he thought. But he had no sooner thrust his head through the flap than the blizzard dealt his face such a blow that he fell back on the mat, crouching near Ghashun, glad of her human warmth.

The air in the tent became hot and heavy again, thick with sour exhalations.

Once, the dogs barked outside, and Vasilov thought he heard someone in the snow. There was no further sound, and he decided he had been mistaken; but a few moments later, moving a leg, he encountered an object that hadn't been there before. Cautiously, he investigated and found a large jug of arrack. A miracle! He sniffed the liquor.

A miracle—but from whom, and why? Then he shrugged and drank deeply. . . . Ah, life wasn't so bad after all!

The sour odour of Ghashun began to excite him again. He thought of the flaxen hair and fair skin of the German girl at Sarepta, the smooth lush limbs of the Magyar woman, "occupation, seamstress," who lived just below the fort. Perhaps everything would come out all right, perhaps he was too impatient—perhaps when Subutai came back from Koulagina, things would be better. In the meantime, here he was, snug in a tent, with plenty of arrack and his captor's wife. . . . Roughly, he seized her shoulder. She snarled and spit at him, first. "Ah," he thought, "she likes me no better than I do her!" He chuckled and handed her the arrack jug. The bitter fumes of the liquor added to the sour heat of the tent. Vasilov constructed an image in his mind from the remembered fragments of the German girl and the Magyar woman, when he seized Ghashun again; and he wondered, cynically what image she held in her mind when she responded to his attack this time. They clutched one another, lying on the cold mat, clamping their eyelids tightly over the bright secret images so remote and sweet, and flagellating with fierce blows, it seemed, the true and hated identity of each other's body. . . .

Thus the night passed, and the blizzard still blew, and snow lay like a soft cloak over the sleeping horde. Utterly weary, people slept soundly in spite of their hastily made camps and the howling storm—aware, even in sleep it seemed, that on the morrow they need not rise again before dawn. And the snow, although in the open it still hissed and stung, lay over their heads like a deep blanket of peace.

Grandma, however, had a terrible dream not long before dawn. She woke in a cold sweat, trembling, her blood like a glacial stream bursting in spurts from ice, a paralytic chill in her bones. She could neither remember the dream, nor why it had seemed like an omen. In the vague light of

dawn, she lay waiting as though for something more, some last cold clarity in which the meaning of the dream would reveal itself.

Through the snow, like a thickness of white felt atop the cloth of her tent, the light came curiously soft and thin. Darkly near-by lay some dogs, huddled here out of the storm ; and across her feet, where he slept like a curled-up dog, lay Tenek.

No sound of horns, no cannon fire nor calls, no sound of waking people came, from beyond. All slept, all lay quietly under the blanket of snow, over them still blowing the wind and snow—now faintly heard, like a muted wailing, or the sound of a distant sea—all motionless, like death.

Staring upward, Grandma lay with the light filtering down through the snow. She slept no more ; but half-awake she dozed and dreamed. She thought of things that seemed forgotten long ago. . . .

There was another tent, like this, another snow. Clearly as though the voices were in this tent, here, right now, she heard someone call a name, "Linga." With a start, she opened her eyes. Why, it was her own name they were calling ! But there was nobody—all was quiet in the tent, nobody called. . . . Yes—it was long ago, another tent, near Bish-Uba the sparkling lake, only last evening rippled by what seemed a late summer breeze, waking, to find ice and snow, come overnight, an early winter blown over the summer pastures, and her own mother calling her name, at dawn !

Then she was a girl, too ? once a small girl, with a little pig-tail tied with a scrap of coloured cloth ? . . . How far, how small, like somebody else !

The fresh dawn of summer days, helping her mother milk the cows, the long clear streaks of light coming like excitement through the still dark, the birds sometimes—were there such days ?

And after, still in the cool dawn, to ride with other girls

and boys, taking the herds out to graze, singing, racing, free and sweet under the warming sun, the intoxicating wind sometimes, the deep clean grass, overhead the great white clouds and floating birds ; the quiet peaceful dusk before the return, perhaps listening, weary and content, to a story told by one of the herdsmen-slaves, one in particular, a great Turk of a man whose whiskers they loved to pull, and who tussled them and tossed them high in the air until they ached with laughter—ah ! was such a thing, ever ?

And even the winter, when the herds were kept mostly in the great corrals roofed with a lace of branches on which the snow fell and packed so that all was pleasant inside as in a white cave—even in winter what fun, the games in the snow ! making frosty houses of the soft flakes, inside which there was actually room for them to play they were in a temple or fort, or, more exciting still, that they were married people in a yurt of their own ! and the time when Aunt Yana was about to bear a child and hadn't been seen for three days on end—as though she were about to perform a feat three times as difficult as other women—how they had chattered with excitement while they modelled a doll-baby of snow and then sneaked up behind the shaman and Uncle Chiak, who were beating gongs and shaking sticks in the air to keep the demons away, leaving the snow-baby at the door of the yurt and running away, shrieking !

She recalled, too, the first day her mother let her stay and help in the yurt all morning, now that she was nearly a grown girl and should learn the ways of a woman's work. It had seemed like a bright and shining day, an adventure, sweeping the yurt with a willow broom, carrying water, feeding the dogs. In the simplest acts, there seemed magic she could learn, as though by knowing these things she could somehow conjure a yurt of her own into existence. What an exciting thing it had seemed, to collect the smooth glossy manure dried hard as stone in a basket and to carry the argols carefully in for the iron brazier—as though this

were an act as thrilling and important, perhaps, as what Aunt Yana had done, that time in her mysterious yurt !

She could recall, too, the first day of her marriage, after the ritual, the capture and kidnap, the quick trip somewhere in the dark, the strange yurt filled with women and girls whom she knew but who looked different somehow, now giggling, chattering, tending and dressing her ; after this and all else, she woke amidst her own iron pots, her own brazier and willow broom, a shining copper bowl, in her own yurt with her own herds to tend and a man to care for, like a dream magically come true ! . . . Could there have been, truly, ever such ecstasy merely to touch lightly the gleaming copper pot ?

Grandma sighed, in the dull glow of a cold dawn, not bitterly but deeply. Like a witch's light luring one on, it seemed looking back. But pain and labour, she knew from living, were the conditions of life ; it began that way, for mother and child alike, and likely the end was similar. The whole of a long life from which the thrill had somehow been lost, so that each day was like another, doing the same things—all this lay behind, as though she were now dead, or about to die.

She thought dimly of the ceaseless labour of life—making salt in the saline marshes under a hot sun ; preparing food, cooking, eyes smarting with smoke ; shearing and carding wool, making clothes, mending with threads made from hamstrings that had lain buried for days and had been pounded in long fine shreds that twisted together ; embroidering kalats and the outer felts of the yurt ; boiling butter until it became dry and hard as iron in the sun, against the winter months—this and all else. But there were moments recalled, too—among the marsh grasses a hot silence broken by the clear, cool call of a bird ; a vague content, at dusk with smoke curling up into a vast colourful sky where hung a pure white moon ; a child peaceful in sleep at her breast ; a tender touch of someone's hand in

sleep—she recalled the deep peace of nature in such moments, as though for these moments her life were part of such quiet peace, as though a time lay, just beyond, where all moments might be such as these. . . .

Grandma drew a deep shuddering sigh, filling her stiff lungs with the air churned warm and fetid from the breathing of Tenek and the dogs and herself. Above her eyes, the light came more white and strong through the snow-covered tent.

Suddenly she tried to move, to stir herself. But either her limbs were too stiff to move, or the way Tenek and the dogs had wedged her in—or could this be death? . . . What had she been dreaming—snow-dolls? copper kettles? pain, like two ends of a line on which one's life was strung? . . . Terribly alarmed, now, Grandma made great efforts to thrust Tenek and the dogs aside, to rise, to run outside in the snow where there were still no sounds, to wake all people lest they be dead.

But she seemed to be sinking deeper and more heavily under the snow, the cold white light, the smoky mist in which clarity was elusive as before. *Subutai, Subutai!* she tried to cry out. But from a great distance now, she could hear a call muted and sweet somehow as dawn, a voice calling her name. And with a last shudder, growing cold as rock, she thought vaguely, "What can this be? what is it now?"

CHAPTER TEN



Not long after dawn, Ubasha and the troops returning from Koulagina came suddenly on the outlying hoshuns of the horde. The wind was abating but the air was still glittering with snow, and many riders stumbled against carts before they could see where to go. The snow had blown and drifted deeply over the carts and tents so that all lay buried except where, occasionally on the sheltered side of a cart, a thick shelf of snow over-hung dense shadows. Even the animals were covered with snow ; and the advent of the troops roused some of the near-by cattle and sheep, whose heads, breaking through the drifts, were raised with querulous lowing and bleating. But otherwise all was silent, lifeless, in the pale white light of dawn.

Ubasha stroked his moustaches, mildly disturbed. Obviously no watch had been kept through the night. But what harm had come of it ? He knew that the people had been so exhausted they could barely stretch tents, crawl under their carts, and let the storm drift over their heads. He himself, and the troops with him, were so weary it seemed they would sleep in the saddle, should they cease moving. But it was already daybreak, and he turned to the trumpeters, assuming a stern air.

“ Sound horns, wake all ! ” he shouted. “ Sentries ! people ! where are all ? ”

The trumpeters blew their horns ; and through the horde, like a ripple spreading far and wide, other horns echoed the sonorous call. Slowly the people stirred, breaking the

snow that lay piled over their tents and carts. Snow was still falling thickly, but men began clearing away the drifts, packing the fallen snow in high banks all about. Animals moved restlessly, adding their complaints to the growing clamour. Children cried, hungrily ; and from beneath the carts tiny shreds of smoke began to rise.

When the people began to examine their situation, the losses during the blizzardous night were found to have been enormous. The accumulated cold, hunger, and exhaustion of the last fifteen days, capped by the great storm, had taken a great toll of life among the people and animals. Wailing rose throughout the horde, seeing the extent of their loss.

But many shrugged philosophically. They were used to hardship, migration, hunger, sudden loss, death. It was true that this mid-winter flight and suffering were unprecedented. But here they were, most of them safe and sound. The worst was over. . . . Weren't these the Emba lands they had heard about, where they could start all over again ? Every gain required a loss. Let the Tsarina try her tricks now—the Torguts were ready !

So ran the comment among the more hardy-minded.

And so volatile were their spirits, so prone to optimism were the Torguts, that within a short time the entire people, spread over the great steppe between the Mugadir hills and the Emba, were digging themselves out of the blizzard with a bustle of confidence, once they had accepted their losses and difficulties as inevitable. . . .

When the Koulagina troops belonging to Chereng, Zebek, and Bambar had gone to seek their uluses, Ubasha rode at the head of his own men through the deep snow.

People shouted at the soldiers, and the riders laughed and shook lances and muskets high in the air. Dogs barked and leaped in the snow, and the horses reared excitedly now and then. Everyone cheered the returning troops and called for details of the siege. Some of the soldiers pointed to Subutai, who was leading Beran's horse laden with the

Kirghiz chieftain's armour. Subutai laughed and shouted back over his shoulder when the people, seeing his trophies, cheered loudly ; he sat on his horse straightly, although he was tired, glad that he had chosen not to wear Beran's heavy chain-mail. Batu, Norbo, and some of the other young men riding with Subutai, tried to shout back further details of the siege to the people ; but they only added to the chaotic din of questions, cheers, and laughter. And as the troops made their way closer and closer to their own ulus, their spirits, like those of the people among whom they passed, rose high in spite of their weariness and the mounting evidence of great losses throughout the horde.

Ubasha Khan, riding at the head of his warriors with Temuru and Choktu, became more gloomy and worried, the more he saw. It was not merely the losses which saddened him—nor the lack of vigilance, evidence of a weakened morale, which worried him. Yet he smiled uncertainly and said, "Well—here we are !"

Temuru and Choktu shrugged, plodding through the snow. But Rabdan, the nephew of Choktu, who was riding close behind, scowled and muttered.

"Here ? and what good, may I ask ?" he said sarcastically. "So that we may be set upon at will by the Cossacks and savage tribes ?"

Choktu and Temuru grumbled agreement. Even Ubasha nodded vaguely when he heard Rabdan speak. But then he said, "We shall see. Perhaps we shall find a way."

They rode silently ahead of the younger men.

Ubasha knew that Rabdan was right. This country, on which they had all counted so heavily, seemed not only a barren waste-land, with little timber or fuel and very few water-courses, but it seemed also poor land to defend. Somehow, perhaps unduly enthused by Zebek and Chereng, Ubasha had thought that the Emba, like the Volga, would provide a mighty barrier which, once crossed, might protect his people from attack. Now they were here ; and any

man could see that the Emba was no defence at all—nothing but a broad shallow stream in a flat barren steppe.

But Ubasha also knew that his people had suffered enormously—that they could move no further, no matter what. Here, and not somewhere beyond, they had willed to come ; and into the effort of reaching these Emba lands, they had poured their last resources of strength and hope. They could travel no more, at least for a time ; to move on would be calamitous, no matter what the cause. . . .

So thought Ubasha. And his features, usually pleasant, became stern and tense. Here the Torguts should stay and regain their strength. Here they should somehow find adequate means of defence. And here, in spite of the barren wintry appearance of the land, perhaps they might even find that it was, truly, the good land they had hoped it to be, where they could live in freedom and peace. . . . Determined to yield to no man on such points as these, no matter what wile and argument Zebek or Chereng might employ, Ubasha rode sternly ahead.

When the riders reached their own ulus at last, Ubasha dismissed most of the younger men, with the exception of Subutai and a few whom he might require for courier duty in the event that the Sarga, or Military Council, had not yet been convoked.

Emerging into a broad space already cleared of the new deep snow and trampled hard, the khan was pleased to see his own yurts had already been raised—to shelter his wife, Mandere, his two small children, his sisters Cedar-chab and Sand-chab, and their Turkish slaves—and that the council yurt had also been established in the clearing. This he considered a good sign ; and he gave orders to raise the white temple yurts, too. He was also pleased to note that the Sarga was already in session, since smoke was pouring out through the iron vent in the roof of the council yurt. And so, taking Temuru and Choktu with him and requesting

the younger men to help with the temple yurts until further command, he entered the council chamber.

Within, the other members of the Sarga were seated on skins and Turkey-carpets around the great iron brazier, which was filled with glowing argols ; they were smoking and passing tea while they talked. When Ubasha and the two saissangs entered, everyone rose and welcomed them effusively, congratulating them on their safe return and pressing them for details of the siege.

At a signal from Zebek, two men left the yurt—Gedesu, who sidled past his father with scarcely a glance, and a slave known as "Zebek's Jew," who bowed deferentially to the khan as he passed.

Then Zebek himself followed the example of the other members, embracing and congratulating Ubasha on the successful outcome of the Koulagina siege.

Ubasha, with a cup of hot tea in his hand and a pipe in his mouth, at length sat down beside the fire, feeling well content and rather sentimental. What a good fellow Zebek could be ! he thought. At times he mistrusted his cousin ; occasionally Ubasha was shrewd in his appraisal of people and their motives, yet ordinarily, prone to conciliation, he loved to believe in the native goodness of all men. Looking around, hearing a murmur of approval for the Koulagina incident still circulating among the council members, he felt a sudden and intense love for them all. What good fellows they all were ! Each of them had his faults and personal motives—what man had not ?—yet now, in the face of common danger and difficulty, how united they could be, for the good of the horde ! . . . From a renewed faith in these men, and from love of all the Torgut people, Ubasha now whole-heartedly congratulated his cousin Zebek and the others for having successfully led the horde safely to these lands near the Emba, and for having established winter camps with such efficiency and speed in spite of the snow. Then he leaned forward, blissfully sipping his hot tea.

"All is well," he said, "and here we shall make new life for ourselves."

Zebek and Chereng exchanged a quick glance. Prince Bambar tugged at his moustaches ; and his son, the Lama Loosang, bent piously over his yellow rosary, made of fig-wood from the sacred pepul tree. Zebek cleared his throat.

"The Starshin Mitrasov and his Cossacks have taken the uluses of Mashî and Assarko," he said, "and they have returned to the Volga."

"Ah !" the khan exclaimed sharply.

"There's no denying," said Bambar, "we have plenty of enemies hereabouts—that's why I kept insisting that we get here on the double-quick and dig in."

"It's true—he did," Zebek said pleasantly. "But that's exactly why Chereng and I felt we should proceed more leisurely—so that the people would be fresh enough to continue travelling, if need be."

"Bambar was right," Ubasha said, "there's no need to go farther. We shall find ways to protect ourselves here."

"But of course ! Impossible to travel farther, in such snow !" said Zebek and Chereng simultaneously.

Ubasha relaxed again ; he was still disturbed, but he felt that once more he had unjustly suspected Zebek of some ulterior motive.

"When the snow packs and freezes, of course," Zebek said, "there may be others who think, like Mashî and Assarko, that it would be a good thing to return to the Volga—particularly should Cossacks appear and offer them safe passage. This we must guard against, or else the uluses might separate and each one go its own way."

"Zebek speaks well," said Ubasha, alternately moved to praise and condemn his cousin. "The horde must be kept together at all costs."

"Well then," said Chereng, "if I may say so, it would have been an excellent thing to have destroyed Koulagina and done away with the Cossacks for good and all !"

"Ach!" said Temuru. "And have given the Tsarina an excuse to send the whole Russian army after us?"

"Perhaps she has enough excuse as it is," said Zebek. "Two more Cossacks were killed yesterday morning."

"What! after I distinctly ordered," cried Ubasha, "that no more should be killed?"

Zebek shrugged.

"Ask Bambar," he said, "they were captives in his ulus."

Bambar said, uncomfortably:

"Well, some of the men claimed these fellows raped their wives, so they dragged them over the snow till they died."

"And my own three Cossacks?" asked the khan.

"Still alive," said the Lama Loosang, without looking up from his beads, "as you ordered—and as God wills."

Temuru spat in the fire.

"This is all pretty far from the point," he said. "We were talking about Koulagina."

"Yes, and the point is," said Chereng, "that here we're really in a trap. Just look at the situation carefully. There's not only the garrison at Koulagina—word has probably gone by now to Traubenberg. We're liable to have them all come marching down on us, when the snow freezes. . . . South of us are the Kara-Kalpaks and the Aral Sea. In addition—while it was, perhaps, an understandable thing for Temuru's boy to spare Beran's life—now we must consider that Nurali and the Kirghiz will learn where we are. Between them all, they can press us back against the Mugadir hills and slaughter our people like sheep. . . . We're obviously in an indefensible position."

Temuru scowled furiously, restraining an angry retort. Wasn't Chereng the very man who had said, glibly, "This will be a highly defensible place, with the Mugadir at our back and the Emba like a sword before us!" . . . Where was Momotubash? thought Temuru, looking around for someone to share his disgust. The pack of tricky, rascally beggars!

Yet the worst of it was that Temuru, like Ubasha and Choktu, knew that Chereng was right. The Djungarian prince—who had painted a false picture before, perhaps deliberately—had become, now they had reached these promised lands near the Emba, painfully correct in his analysis. . . . What angered the newcomers to the Sarga most was the feeling that they had somehow been tricked.

Ubasha, who betrayed his emotion by the way he flushed and stared into the fire, said quietly :

"It would appear, then, that in our absence the council has made some decision."

"No decision at all," said Zebek. "On the contrary, these are merely facts."

"Facts?" said Ubasha Khan. "It's also a fact that the people are exhausted—that it would be criminal to drive them another step. Perhaps the situation here isn't so bad as it seems. This is good land, and perhaps we shall find ways to defend it," he said. "After all, the people need rest now—not facts."

"They need good pastures, too," said Zebek, dryly. "If this were really good land, perhaps I might agree with you, for there might be ways to protect ourselves, at least for a time."

"But it is!" said Ubasha. "It's good land—our people under Ho-Orluk lived here one time."

"Less than one-third as many, then," said Zebek. "And probably the pasture was better, too. We have dug through the snow, and the grass is sparse and not very good. Momotubash, who is out ahead, has already sent back reports that the land seems small and not well watered. Other messages have come, from all parts of the horde. There is little fuel to be had. There are many more complaints. This is not good land for our people."

"Why didn't you say all this before?" said Temuru.

Ubasha laid a hand on his arm.

"How could they know?" he said softly. "It is no man's fault."

"I don't know about that," said Bambar. "But I do know that here we are wide open to attack, as Zebek has said, on land not worth defending. Many animals have already been lost. There is little grass below the snow. The poorest half of our herds should be killed, and their meat salted and dried and frozen. . . . Otherwise all will die—and we ourselves, into the bargain."

"But then," said Ubasha, feeling himself being driven into a corner, "what would you have us do?"

The Lama Loosang briefly raised his eyes from his rosary and glanced at Chereng, who sprang to his feet and turned to a large chest where, among other things, the Torgut census rolls were kept.

"Ah!" said Chereng. "We have considered just such a thing, in the event it seemed best——"

From the top of the chest he took a map, which he began to unroll.

"Now if you'll notice," he said, "there are four directions we can travel."

"Remarkable!" growled Temuru.

Chereng paid no attention.

"First," he said, "we can return westward, back to the Volga lands."

Everyone murmured dissent.

"Very well," said Chereng. "Northward—we'd run right into Traubenberg's arms. South is the Aral Sea; but to the south-east is the land of the Kara-Kalpaks, between the sea and the Mugadir hills. This is small land, not very good, and bordered by deserts."

The councillors murmured again, and someone said:

"Well then, what's the other direction?"

"East," said Chereng, "into Asia."

"Ah! But what of the Mugadir hills?"

"There's an excellent pass—right here, between these

two peaks. It's our only chance. Once we gain the pass, none can attack us from the west—and all of Asia lies beyond."

"For instance," said Zebek, "there's excellent land in the Turgai country, beyond Lake Chalkhar—not very much peopled, I'm told. Once there, the land offers a fine natural defence, lying as it does between the lake swamps, the Rivers Irgiz and Turgai, and the Moun Kum desert. This is the land, perhaps, we should have headed for from the very first."

A buzz of excited comment followed these remarks. Someone stirred the fire and tossed more argols into the brazier. Tea was passed, and smoke rose from many pipes.

Ubasha sat listening to the talk. He felt thoroughly confused. As usual, his clever cousin seemed to be right, and even the old warrior Temuru was giving his grudging agreement. But it seemed to Ubasha that there was something much deeper than chance about all their misfortunes—the loss of the two small uluses and the threat of further dispersal of the horde; the murder of all but a few of the Cossack hostages; the strange discrepancy between what they had been led to expect of the Emba lands and what they had actually found—all these things seemed so effectively to block any action other than to move eastward again, that they could scarcely be accidental. Yet to feel personally piqued, to let any petty considerations stand in the way of his people's welfare, was utterly impossible for Ubasha. He knew, now, that the Torgut horde had not yet reached those lands where peace and freedom might be found. And so he said:

"Then it is agreed, and so it shall be. Yet here we shall stay, until the people have rested well, and until the work of killing and curing the animal's meat has been done."

"But of course!"

"In such weather, what else?"

"Until Chagan-Sara," said Ubasha, firmly seizing this small point. "Until the New Year feast, we shall stay."

So it was decided ; and there was great talk among the council members now. Yet, in spite of the pleasant illusion of unity among themselves—once more gained at the cost of conceding to Zebek—Ubasha stared rather sadly into the argol coals. He tried not to think that here, none the less, they might have been able to hold their enemies at bay, that here they might have come to terms with the Tsarina as originally planned, or that here they might find, somehow, sufficient pasture for all. But he couldn't help thinking, more than ever, that Zebek was an untrustworthy man. So finally he said :

"Cousin, your flank seems most exposed to such sudden raids as have already lost us Assarko and Mashi—and among their people, too, were many good fighters."

"Yes, it's true," said Zebek, "our tasks have been extremely heavy, without nursing every little ulus along. Besides, we must take great care now lest others, hearing that we plan to travel still farther east, have a mind to return."

He frowned ; and Ubasha, also schooled in the art of dissimulation, looked back at him with limpid eyes.

"But now that we are agreed to go on," Ubasha said pointedly, "such rumours will no longer disturb the people, who want time to rest in safety and prepare for Chagan-Sara."

"That's true, too. What do you suggest, cousin ?"

"That we send you, let us say, a thousand men. These, together with your own, should be ample guarantee against Cossacks, Kara-Kalpaks, wolves, or such rumours as might get around to make the people uneasy, coming at an improper time."

"Excellent," said Zebek, sucking his tea and lowering his eyes to the argols blazing in the bluish air of the yurt. "And it's also true that we've been even less fortunate than

most in regard to animals. So it might be a good thing to send your men with proper provisioning. And perhaps," he said, suddenly wrinkling his forehead as though trying to recall something, "you might send along that young fellow who did so nicely at Koulagina, what's-his-name——"

"Subutai."

"Ah yes, Subutai—Temuru's boy, isn't he?" murmured Zebek, blowing on his tea. "That's the kind we need—quite a bold fellow, so the Princess Cedar-chab tells me. . . ."

And so, after couriers had been despatched to all parts of the horde with orders that the poorer half of all herds must be slaughtered and cured, Ubasha pushed aside the tapestried door of the council yurt and looked for Subutai. He smiled when he noticed that the boy had tethered his Bar-Kul mare and Beran's horse not far from the blue-and-white tuks planted in the snow at the entrance of Ubasha's household yurt. Subutai, who had been helping with the temple yurts, came running when the khan called. Ubasha walked aside with him a little, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder, and said :

"You go to the Prince Zebek. Take a thousand men, and guard his people for a time. See that all goes well, and that no foolish ones try to return through the snow whence we came." Then he lowered his voice and added, "Learn all you can of the conditions among Zebek's people—of what extent and nature his herds and wealth. Talk with his Jew. Learn all you can. . . ."

While he was talking, they walked toward Subutai's horse ; and now Cedar-chab came from the yurt. She smiled uncertainly at Subutai, and took her brother's arm. She bent her face a little, mysteriously, and fingered the silver chain-mail laden on Beran's horse. Subutai flushed deeply and tried to concentrate on what the khan was saying. Ubasha smiled, and said a few pleasant words about Subutai's exploit at Koulagina, which made him blush all the more.

Just then, Zebek emerged from the council yurt and came over to where they stood. For a moment he gazed absently at Subutai's trophies of war. Familiarly, he drew Cedar-chab's free arm through his own and looked at Subutai.

"Look, lad," he said. "You'll find my Jew with your brother Gedesu somewhere close by. He'll go with you to your father's aimak and help you provision for the men you bring. Then he'll find you the way to my ulus—he's a clever man, my Jew."

Without a word, then, without looking around, flushed and confused, Subutai sprang upon his white horse and rode away.

Zebek made some remark to Cedar-chab and laughed. She looked down at the white, trampled ground. Only Ubasha, wondering about all manner of things, looked after Subutai.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Meanwhile, in the lee of the council yurt, Gedesu had been discoursing with Zebek's Jew, one Lev Zolotsky.

Lev's dark face was built like a dodecahedron, the governing symbol of which was a great hooked nose, a regular berkut beak, which made his small full lips seem of little consequence but which, on the other hand, seemed to be given special emphasis by the dark shiny eyes set back under his sloping forehead. These eyes interrupted the outward slope only to project the more strongly that great final peninsula of his face, so that his nose seemed really a gun barrel, a musket sight, along which his eyes were unblinkingly focused. These features never failed to fascinate the Torguts, so much so that Zebek himself would often sit for hours at a time, drinking arrack and smacking his lips, regarding his Jew Lev unhurriedly, the way a man might who has captured for himself a great bird of some extinct or unknown species.

Zebek valued Lev highly, however, for a certain turn of mind that made him able to deal with wealth somehow like a magician overcoming the simple laws of life.

The Jew had fallen into the prince's hands only last autumn. On a visit to Novgorod, Zebek had indulged in a game of French cards with some Russians. He lost heavily, including a golden seal reputed to have belonged to Genghis Khan. A Russian nobleman lost heavily as he. Finally the winners left the game, but the two losers continued to play. The Russian wagered Lev Zolotsky, whom he had

captured from the Krim Turks in the recent war near Astrakhan, against one thousand of Zebek's sheep. The Torgut prince won. Afterward, Lev Zolotsky said :

"Great lord, rich master—never gamble a thousand sheep against one Jew !"

"Why not ?"

"Why, lord and master, great prince ! It is only the Jew's mind you win, not his body—for that body is like the sheep, that belong to the pasture. The sheep remain with you so long as you treat them well, like friends visiting in your house. It is the fruit of the Jew's body, his thought like golden apples, which you may pluck and use. Against this your forfeit should have been, not the bodies of sheep, but their fruit—their wool, great lord ! And in this way, too, you would have been in no danger of losing your sheep themselves."

Like a miracle of water in the desert, the Jew had already succeeded in making part of Zebek's squandered wealth reappear, like water bubbling up as though it had only been idling underground. Yet this was accomplished by Lev with such disarming simplicity—as though it were no trick at all, but just a mere setting-in-motion of some natural law—that men such as Gedesu, who had achieved wealth in their own measure with much puffing and blundering of schemes, like a magician's neophytes who let the audience see exactly how the thing is done, were completely entranced by Lev Zolotsky, and longed to learn from him the one magic word which might gain them the same golden goal with less opprobrium.

Therefore it was that Gedesu, taking advantage of such a moment as this, was conversing in hoarse whispers with Lev.

"But it's a bad thing, Lev my dear brother," he was saying, "this order to segregate and kill half of our herds, which surely we can't eat ourselves, isn't it so ?"

He waited, his narrow brow wrinkled, his cheeks puffed out querulously, looking at Lev's beak intently.

"Great lord, rich friend," said Lev finally, adopting an effective variation of his usual epistolic manner with Zebek. . . .

Lev spoke Torgut with a strange blending of Turkish, Arabic, Hebraic, Russian accents and mispronunciations which gave his speech the effect of a golden nugget concealed in a great variety of ores. He also was unable to place the words of a sentence in their proper order—object, subject, verb—so that to his Torgut listeners, his speech sounded strangely as theirs might to some alien grammarian or to Lev himself, topsy-turvy, as : "Then here the snow I to whom it unknown is enjoyed." Such verbal eccentricities often made his listeners laugh delightedly at first, just as the lisping of the Chinese and the way they elided their *r*'s, saying *Togai* for Torgut, *Tukui* for Turki, always sent them into peals of laughter. However, such was the golden essence of what Lev said, that soon his listeners learned to pay slight attention to such idiosyncrasies, placing all their attention on his thought.

"Great lord, rich friend," Lev repeated with emphasis, "such is not so. . . . When the meat is dead, why burden your back with what is useless as gold in the other world? Keep what you can eat—distribute the rest."

"But," Gedesu quavered, "but I have gone to great effort to assemble such cattle and sheep as I have."

"Assemble, in their place," said Lev, "something else. Wealth is a fluid thing. In many parts of the world, the wise man is he who has his wealth not in cattle and sheep, not even in gold—which you can't eat; which is heavy to carry; which may be stolen—but rather in certain paper with marks thereon."

"Really, can this be true?" said Gedesu, wetting his lips. "So that he might carry the wealth of a khan, for instance, like a piece of paper in the breast of his kalat?"

"Even so," said Lev.

"But then," Gedesu said thoughtfully, "what if there

came robbers and thieves—men who stop at nothing, men stronger than oneself—could it be, thus they might take all the fruits of a man's wisdom and wealth in this way ? ”

“ My great rich friend, this is true,” Lev said. “ But therefore such men place themselves and this piece of paper, so to speak, in the protection and safe-keeping of some powerful lord, some banker, some man of great skill in watching over these very things.”

“ On the other hand,” said Gedesu, “ truly it is hard to keep a man with a musket from taking your sheep, your cattle and goods.”

Lev nodded.

“ These things are easily separated from a man, like kumiss from the curds of milk,” he said. “ And how much more easily, too, when the animals can no longer move of their own accord ! Dead meat ! Why, in time, too, it will rot in the sun ! . . . These are things to know ; for cattle and sheep—like your eye, your finger, my merciful rich friend ! —are only the means whereby a man comes to great wealth and power.”

“ Yes, these are fine things to know,” said Gedesu hurriedly, for he saw, approaching them on his white horse, leading Beran's horse laden with the gleaming chain-mail, his brother Subutai. He added in a hoarse whisper, “ We will speak later—more of such wisdom ! ”

Subutai, ignoring Gedesu, said to Lev :

“ We travel to the ulus of Zebek-Dordzhi, taking one thousand men. Each man shall bring a sheep for his own provisioning.”

Lev threw out his arms in a wide gesture.

“ But illustrious lord—one thousand sheep ! Surely it is difficult for each man to despoil himself of a sheep, merely to help my lord Zebek protect his people and herds from beasts and Cossack riders ! Rather let our rich friend Gedesu lend us a thousand of his own slaughtered sheep—which will put my master deep in his debt.”

Subutai laughed grimly.

"That's not a bad idea," he said.

Nudging his mare, Gedesu turned back and said :

"I was about, really, somehow the idea came to me, too, that's what I wanted to say," he faltered, looking at Lev with the fawning air of a man who wishes to show that his lesson in financial strategy has taken effect. When he rode forward, Lev leaned toward Subutai and said, "Noble captain, you understand that my master will cure the hides and in payment will return them, fine sheep-skins, to cancel the debt with Gedesu."

"Excellent, you're a wizard !" cried Subutai, laughing.

"Eh ! what's this ?" Gedesu said uneasily, turning again.

"Why, only the thought, great lender," said Lev, "that when such matters are done properly, as now, all gain. The men gain free provisions—half a sheep per man is sufficient, since the meat is a gift to them ; my master, as is only right, will gain half of the thousand carcasses ; while you gain most of all—equal of your sheep, plus the golden coin of my master's good will."

Satisfied with this explanation, Gedesu let the others ride abreast ; and out of the corner of his good eye, he glanced covetously at the chain-mail his brother had won from Beran.

"That's a pretty thing you have," he said to Subutai, switching his glance quickly to Lev for a twinkle of approbation. "How many animals should it bring, would you say ?"

"Such questions," said Subutai to Lev, "betray the bleating of sheep when they see their masters approaching with knives."

"Oh, very well !" said Gedesu, riding forward again.

They rode on through the hoshuns. What wind and snow still blew was at their backs. Lev said to Subutai :

"Brave captain, golden companion—you speak truly. Life is a sheep which the wise man shears without fail in

season. . . . This brother of yours, Gedesu, gains with an eye or finger what he might more easily have won with a musket or lance."

"These are good thoughts," said Subutai.

"Like you," Lev said thoughtfully, "I too am a warrior of sorts. I fight with a mind sharp as a lance. Once I was a student, residing in a city far away, Damascus. There I studied the Talmud and the Torah—our holy books like, somewhat, your Bichik. Then my father, who was a trader, sent me among the Krim Turks, who captured me and made me a slave. . . . Think you I like the conditions of servitude? Not at all, noble captain! But I am a man of great curiosity. How I love new things, new people, new places! Twice, three times really, I have changed everything, even my name. Once it was Lev son of Samuel. Then it was Lev Sam-Ali, and among the Russ, Zolotsky. Perhaps among your people I shall take a true Torgut name, Levambar, perhaps. . . . What matter such things to me? The true thing, illustrious friend, is what I am able to do—to see my way among new people, new problems, clear as a lance point, like your dagger and gun, to bring about new and more lasting arrangements of men and things in which, perhaps, I may be permitted to live peacefully and well."

Subutai would have liked to converse with Lev Zolotsky further on these and several points. But at this moment, they were approaching Grandma's cart and tent. Subutai's joy of home-coming was numbed by the fact that people were gathered about, wailing; from within the tent, too, came the hollow sound of ghostly moaning. . . . What could it mean?

Subutai sprang down from his horse; but it was Gedesu, for once in his life moving more swiftly than Subutai, who tore the flap of Grandma's tent aside.

Within, it was dark. And from inside came such a peculiar odour, as of decay, that all moved backward involuntarily.

But Gedesu reached in and seized Tenek by the legs, hauling him out. The dogs came out, too, their tails hanging, their bellies close to the ground, their faces reflecting a fear, it seemed, of the moans issuing from their own throats—as though such sounds were made, not by their own will, but by some strange wind howling down their throats. The dogs, and Tenek, slunk off and crouched near-by in the snow.

When Subutai crawled into the tent, from the very first he could see, Grandma was lying there white as snow, white as a cold stone cut to her own image. . . . His hand trembled as he reached out to stroke the kind old face, the weary smile now restfully pressed on her lips as though by some last thought that none but she, holding it for ever secret, could know. Yet for the moment Subutai felt no grief, unable to transform the peaceful fact of death into a sentiment of personal grievance.

But, suddenly shaking with great blubbing quivers of his fat body, Gedesu burst out sobbing as though in personal agony. While to Subutai it had seemed that he and Grandma were somehow contemplating a quiet thought, this wretched bawling of Gedesu now struck him with the recollection that death was not the calm conclusion of a long life weary and well done, but rather, a sentiment of heart-rending agony among the living. And so, uttering a long shuddering sob himself, Subutai clutched blindly at his brother ; and the two clung together, weeping at Grandma's side.

"She was so good," blubbered Gedesu, "so rich—such work—such herds—so old——"

He sniffled and sobbed. But Subutai, unable to detect the scheming already going on somewhere in Gedesu's head, embraced his brother gently. His own grief seemed almost negligible, compared to the vastness of Gedesu's anguish. The man seemed stricken as by his own death ; and Subutai, feeling gentle and kind with his brother for

the first time he could remember, drew Gedesu quietly from the tent, saying :

"Come now, Gedesu ; there is no more we can do. Come, Ghashun will know—we must find Ghashun, Gedesu. Ghashun will know what to do for Grandma. . . . Come, Gedesu."

People, in a kindly way, pointed where Gedesu's hoshun might be found.

The two brothers rode side by side. Somewhere behind them, Lev Zolotsky followed at a discreet distance, cracking his finger-joints to keep them from stiffening in the cold. Gedesu finally ceased crying, and only the furrowed grime on his face marked where fountainous tears had flowed ; but from time to time a great shudder passed like an upheaved billow of snow from his body. But soon even such tokens of grief came to an end ; and he rode rigid and silent as Subutai, except that a melancholy dignity was added to his already pompous bulk. And Subutai felt only a cold white emptiness, like snow, and a cold stone in his throat. . . .

Already they were passing among Gedesu's animals ; and here was Merghen, clearing away the snow, looking at them in startled surprise, opening and closing his mouth several times, and finally stammering :

"What ! *You*, Gedesu ? but we thought you were in your . . . Well, but . . . O Buddha, Khan Tengri ! could such a thing be !"

Subutai, thinking that Merghen had already learned of Grandma's death and was trying to offer consolation, said quietly :

"Never mind, Merghen—what happens is done. . . . Where's Ghashun ?"

Merghen gulped again, looking from Subutai to Gedesu in fright.

"Why, but," he stammered, "look, Gedesu—she—she's gone yonder, to Yelden's wife—yes, that's it ! Yelden's

wife is ill. . . . Go fetch her—I'll get things to order, here !”

But as Gedesu made no reply, Merghen went on more importunately :

“ And look, Gedesu—they have a whole sheep broiling over there, yonder at Yelden's. I shouldn't wonder but what they'd be glad, really, for you to come eat—only, leave me a little !” he added, as though to make his story ring more true.

But now some wide-eyed children had come around from the other side of one of Gedesu's carts. “ He's not there !” they exclaimed. “ It's not Gedesu—he's here !” They stared at Gedesu, with fingers at their open mouths, and then suddenly they scampered away.

“ Something's wrong here !” Gedesu cried sharply. “ Come, tell me—is it Ghashun ? Can it be, she's dead, too ? What is it ? . . . Out of my way ! clear way, there !”

And he rode forward, through the animals and carts, brushing heedlessly against the banked snow so that some of the cake-like piles at the top came tumbling down to smash whitely under foot.

A crowd of gaping idlers stood before his tent. From within the tent came shrieks of laughter, drunken belches, snatches of song, absolutely unintelligible sounds, a pandemonium of brawling drunkenness.

Gedesu's face swelled with rage so that the skin was stretched nearly to bursting, no longer red but white as a sheep-gut stretched tight on a drum. With a mighty heave, he ripped the tent cloth free from its moorings, making a sharp tearing sound—an act of vandalism toward his own property so foreign to Gedesu's cautious nature that everyone, including himself, turned for a moment to watch the wind rattle the torn cloth and blow it away. But there was a much more fascinating, dramatic sight to be seen. On the matting, where the tent had formerly covered them, lay Ghashun and Vasilov !

"What will Gedesu do?" people whispered, shivering with anticipation. "Vashi, you're too young! Run home—tell Aunt Sarkhu to come—quick, now!"

Ghashun, startled to find the open sky where the roof of the tent had been, blinked and turned her bleary eyes toward the people.

"Help, murder!" she suddenly screamed, drunkenly. "Rape!"

Many more people came running—Aunt Sarkhu and others, women, men, children. All looked at Ghashun, who struggled to her feet and began to kick at the drunken Russian, shouting persistently at the crowd, "Rape! rape!" while Vasilov lay there with his head thrown back, laughing like a madman. . . . All looked, too, at Gedesu, who had unstrapped the musket from his back and who seemed, believe it or not, about to squander still more of his wealth by shooting his slave!

Gedesu, feeling all eyes upon him, fumbled with the unfamiliar weapon, trying to ram home the powder and shot with the rod. The people became quiet now, respectfully watching him. But he seemed too fat to manage both musket and rod, and somebody tittered. Subutai, with an expressionless face, took the musket from Gedesu and skilfully made it ready to shoot. Now everyone laughed a little, and Gedesu muttered angrily. When he took the gun, the crowd became quiet again; all held their breath, standing on tiptoe to look over one another's shoulders. Guiding his horse, Gedesu jockeyed around for a good position. Several times he raised the musket to shoot, only to decide that his angle of fire was bad. After he had performed these manœuvres several times, the crowd began to titter again. Someone shouted, "Just ram it into his belly and strike the flint!" Through all this commotion, Vasilov lay on the mat, laughing and shouting, as though completely unconcerned; and this fearlessness of the Cossack, coupled with the scorn most people felt for Gedesu and

Ghashun, began to sway the crowd with a good-natured sympathy for Vasilov. They jeered at Gedesu, and he lost his head, frantic to act in becoming manner ; he shot without looking, with his good eye tightly closed and his face turned away from the bucking gun.

Everyone craned forward to see what had occurred. The acrid smoke blew away on the wind. Vasilov was still alive and laughing, lurching to his feet, pointing, laughing and shouting :

"Oho ! he shot one of his own sheep !"

Sure enough ! there was a dead sheep, dogs yelping all about—Gedesu had shot one of his own sheep !

Everyone laughed heartily.

Gedesu opened his good eye and his face flushed with shame. Muttering, he threw down his musket and dismounted, drawing a dagger from his belt in a last effort to maintain his pride.

"I'll show you !" he shouted, puffing and sick at heart, "Somebody bind him up—bind him up like a sheep, according to law !"

Nobody moved.

"Merghen ! . . . Ghashun !" Gedesu cried desperately.

But Merghen had gone to rescue the dead sheep from the hungry dogs, and Ghashun had slunk off somewhere.

At this point, Subutai intervened. He leaped down from his horse and approached Gedesu.

"Look here," he said, "you may kill him or not, as you see fit. But I'd like to buy the man. How much is he worth ?"

It was amazing, the way Gedesu cooled down. He still fingered his knife, reluctantly, like a man set on some spendthrift act worth more to his self-esteem than paltry wealth. But his good eye narrowed, and slowly then he put the dagger back in his belt, saying :

"Well ! but that's another way of looking at the thing !"

Hearing this, people laughed again and the crowd began

to leave, feeling that the incident had come to an undramatic but pleasant end, and only a few remained to watch the bargaining.

"I still have a hundred sheep of my own," said Subutai.

"Not enough!" cried Gedesu warmly. "What about the sheep and cattle you get from Grandma?"

"They're not mine, nor yours either. They're father's."

"But sooner or later!" said Gedesu. "And he's old, too, like Grandma. Besides, he can't take care of them now. No more can you. . . . And Grandma would like to know her animals are being well cared for, I'm sure," he whined.

"One hundred sheep!" Subutai said firmly.

Gedesu, aware that he could get no more from his brother, cast a crafty glance at Beran's armour, which a few loiterers were fingering with admiration.

"Well now," he said, "perhaps—perhaps if you added that silver armour of yours——"

"Sheep's broiling!" shouted Merghen, suddenly appearing around a banked pile of snow.

"What sheep?" Gedesu said blankly.

"Why, the one you shot!" cried Merghen, laughing and ducking from sight.

The odour of broiling sheep, now that Merghen had mentioned it, could be smelt appetizingly in the cold air.

"Then it's a bargain?" said Gedesu hopefully, feeling that the chain-mail would establish him, somehow, as a man of prowess again. "Come—we'll have broiled sheep on the bargain!"

As a matter of fact, Subutai was glad to make the bargain. The chain-mail, which seemed too heavy and restricting for ordinary wear, he considered principally a trophy—and a difficult one to carry around, at that. Too, he enjoyed imagining how Gedesu would struggle and puff, trying to get the armour down over his folds of fat; and he smiled ironically to think how the arrogant Beran would flush, could he only know that his fine chain-mail was now in the

hands of a great fat hero who closed his eyes and turned his head aside, even when shooting a sheep !

Gedesu, with a great joint of meat in his hand, began to feel better. And at last Ghashun reappeared, seeming dry and bitter as usual, as though nothing had happened.

"Faster, you fool Merghen—we're freezing here !" she shouted at Merghen who, with some others, had begun to erect Gedesu's yurt. And then she turned on Gedesu, screaming, "Stop stuffing your fat cheeks, you coward, like it was another man's sheep you were guzzling ! . . . A fine bargainer you are ! What's the good of that tin stuff ? Think you, can it be milked or sheared or eaten ? You should have got three hundred sheep—that's what Korlok got for his wife's rape ! . . . And who's going to do the heavy work now—me, I suppose ? Well, you're mistaken."

And sniffing the air, as though in moral indignation of some sort, she took a piece of meat for herself.

Gedesu stopped gnawing and his face grew red.

"Why, you—I could kill you too !" he sputtered. "Look, don't think I can't see things—even with one eye ! You and your rape ! you're a fine one to talk. . . . Why—why——"

Ghashun swung around sharply.

"Listen !" she shouted. "You talk like that and I'll take my sheep and cattle and go back to my father—see if I don't !"

Gedesu looked at her in panic.

"No, don't say that !" he cried. "Stay, I didn't know what I said—don't go !"

Subutai, disgusted with all that was going on, wiped his greasy fingers on his boots and left the fire without saying a word. He gave Beran's horse to Vasilov, who had sobered, and together they rode off, seeking some decent clothing for the Cossack and rounding up the men who were to travel to Zebek's ulus.

Lev Zolotsky remained with Gedesu.

He shivered, although he was wearing one of Zebek's

cast-off furs. It was a curious thing, the wind seemed to have dropped and the air, what little snow was falling, seemed warmer ; yet he was beginning to feel a chill, none the less—perhaps because he was bored. . . .

The brazier, glowing and hissing when snow fell in the coals, rather than warming the air seemed only to make the whole clearing bleak and cold by contrast. Walls of snow were banked around, the carts stood forlornly covered with snow ; even the frame-work of Gedesu's yurt, already raised near-by, seemed only to emphasize what cold wind still blew, whistling as it did through the thin willow-work of the walls.

Lev thought of the hot sun in Damascus, lying like a golden blanket of dust on the quiet streets, the sharp black shade so cool under a tree, and the deep blue sky. Nostalgically he closed his eyes and thought, "Ah ! what am I doing here, with nothing to gain ?" But it was a passing nostalgia, and he opened his eyes, clear again to the cold reality of this Torgut camp in the Aral plain, stimulated again by the thought of these people who, with the proper coaxing and guile, might be made to yield something after all. "But never," he thought, "praise be to God—never have I been like yonder fat slob—nor his wife, like a greedy bag. . . . Ah yes, my rich hypocritical schlemiel—it's either you or myself, and that's a fact !" And, hunching his fur up to the tip of his great steaming nose, with his eyes sharp and unblinking again, he said to Gedesu at last :

"Merciful forgiver of sins, rich friend ! Let us go now, as we said, and see to the killing of sheep."

The time drew on to midday and afternoon, and Lev went among Gedesu's flocks always picking the sheep which seemed to promise the soundest and sweetest meat.

"That one yonder," he would say, "how lush and fat-looking the meat—too lazy to calf ! Yes, and poor wool, too—you'll get little use from that one, take my word !"

Gedesu, and Ghashun too, fell under the spell of Lev's facile manner and words. Ghashun, who would have turned a face hard as stone to one of their neighbours asking the loan of even one single sheep, seemed so delighted to grant such a favour, as Lev painted it, to a great lord like Zebek, that she went among the sheep zestfully wielding a knife, herself, creating a havoc of blood and death among the flocks she and Gedesu had acquired by many laborious schemes. And Gedesu, too, felt a pleasure, a sense of power and self-esteem, so that he slaughtered with a bold stroke, as though he were redeeming himself, for all to see and admire, after his failure to act thus in the morning. Only Merghen, watching the great bald faces of the sheep whiten with the emptying stroke of death, cast from time to time a dubious glance at Gedesu ; but then he winked at Lev and shrugged, and went on with his work.

Finally Subutai returned, leading his troop of men. Each man then swung a carcass across his horse, the white fleece of the sheep smeared here and there with blood and clotted with dirty snow, the flesh still warm. . . . To one side, Ghashun and Gedesu, tired and dripping with blood, but vastly polite and happy in some final conversation with Lev, now turned to stare at the men while Lev mounted his mare.

As Subutai raised an arm and the men started to move, Vasilov, dressed in good boots and a warm cloak, leaned out of his saddle and looked back at Ghashun and then at Gedesu. Without a smile, without even a twinkle in his eyes, he bleated like a sheep.

Some children standing near-by stared at Gedesu and then at Vasilov riding away ; and then, turning back to Gedesu, they made the same bleating sound themselves. Gedesu shouted at them ; but this only seemed to scare them off a short distance, where they were quickly joined by others, bleating, a whole chorus of jeering sheep, at the unfortunate Gedesu. . . .

"Great friend," said Lev to Subutai, "such people ! But are they very rich ? "

"Yes—that's about all you can say for them ! " said Subutai, who now recalled with shame how readily his brother's tears had earlier taken him in. He added angrily, "People of wealth have little else."

"But mighty lord, my friend ! " said Lev. "You sound like a man who has no use for riches."

"None."

"That's so," Lev said thoughtfully. "What use is gold, I say ? Or even the paper I gave them. . . . Does it represent some man's sweat ? It can no longer produce even a sneeze. Is it a sheep, good for wool or food ? It can no longer be worn or eaten. . . . It is nothing—a mere yellow good-for-nothing—a scrap of paper. Ah, my warrior friend, how I envy you ! With one breath you scatter the paper and gold, with your lance you skewer whatever you need or want. I merely garner men's sweat and call it wealth, though it no longer exists ; whereas you are like death itself, mighty prince, setting things to rights, clearing the way for new life."

Subutai rode along beside Lev, disturbed and silent ; finally, picking his way among words like a horse among rocks in the dark, he said :

"But I am no mighty prince—nor know I much good of death."

"Ah, but death is a necessity," said Lev musingly, as though speaking to himself. "For if all things continued to live, then I ask—how could any find food or a place to sleep ? Therefore it was that the Lord Jehovah, who created life, created He also the famine and flood and disease. Just as the man who writes many promises to pay, only writes new paper to get rid of the old, just so, many lives have been written like promissory notes. Now mark you well, my young friend—would the Lord Jehovah be less wise than a banker ? Just as the banker, every so

many years, sends his good agent bankruptcy through the world to tear and destroy his notes, so too, Jehovah discounts the promise to pay with new life issued, new hope—and he sends his own good agent, death, to collect the old people like bankrupt notes.”

“But then,” said Subutai, “if you think all these things—then why is it you deal in paper and gold and all such tricks?”

“Why, young friend, great captain, what a question—don’t you know, there are two parts of a man? . . . And then again, slave I may be—but so long as I can shape things to come, perhaps I shall some day be free; for that man, and he alone, is free who can determine how life will be. . . . And still again,” he said musingly, “sometimes at night I think, perhaps I do such things merely to keep from becoming bored with life.”

“Bored with life?” said Subutai.

“Ah yes,” said Lev, sighing, “you wouldn’t know.”

Several hours later, having travelled many miles through the bustling encampment, they entered the outer hoshuns of Zebek’s ulus. Here, late in the afternoon as it was, the people had put things so well to order that their tents and yurts seemed to have been established for days. The arrival of Subutai’s troop excited great interest; and the people stood about, in the snow still lightly falling, staring at the Russian and the Jew riding at Subutai’s side. An old man, the shulenga of a hoshun, detached himself from a group gathered around a near-by cart and came riding importantly toward Subutai.

“A good omen,” he croaked, “an excellent omen. . . . His eyes have been flowing and now the flowing has ceased—clearly a sign the snow will cease. And there is already a thin ice on his face, clearly a sign the snow will soon freeze.”

The people around the cart made way.

All breathed heavily, looking down at what had once been Captain Dudin, commander of the Cossack hostages

captured near the Volga. His body, lying on a coarse matting, looked like a bundle of greenish lumps done up, as it were, with mighty effort ; but actually, the uncured thongs had been applied rather loosely so that only as they became short and dry, with time, had they shrunk into his flesh. . . .

“ See, like a torn bank-note left on the Tsarina’s doorstep,” said Lev at last, in a curious voice, “ so that the debtors, on fear of their own lives, can never return.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



That night, after he had posted his men in a sentry line to the south-east of Zebek's ulus, Subutai, utterly exhausted, lay down to sleep for a while. Here on the Aral plain there were few trees, and so there were no great crackling fires, as at Koulagina. Subutai drew his long coat tightly about himself and lay down to sleep under a snow-bank.

"Wake me at moonrise," he said to Vasilov.

While Subutai slept, the Cossack paced up and down in the soft dark snow. Now that he was cold sober again, Vasilov felt a great disgust for himself. And he felt sad, too, thinking how his life had cost Subutai the last of his sheep. He walked over to where his friend was sleeping, breathing unevenly as he slept in the cold shadow of the snow-bank. Vasilov removed his new sheep-skin cloak and threw it over the sleeper, and then he swung his arms to keep warm when he paced back and forth again.

Vasilov's eyes filled with tears, thinking of Subutai. What a true friend the Torgut was! he thought. He recalled the day they first met, a spring day. . . .

Spring had been late in coming, that year, the horde was still in winter quarters. Armed with a sling-shot, Vasilov was exploring the high rocky bank of the Volga north of Jevat, looking for birds. Suddenly he saw a Torgut boy swimming the Volga with his pony, coming through the shimmering waves of the spring flood-water. Vasilov crouched down in the bushes and sighted his sling-shot with excitement.

Wasn't it all right to kill a Torgut? They were something like animals, weren't they—birds, rabbits, and the like?

But as the boy and his pony scrambled out of the water, sparkling wet in the spring sun, Vasilov could hear the boy singing—fragments of a tune sad but lightly sung. . . . And Vasilov, on the verge of letting a sharp stone fly straight at the boy's eye, for some reason changed his aim, so that the stone struck actually near the pony's left forefoot.

The pony stumbled, scrambling for footing among the slippery pebbles, and seemed to bruise his knee. The Torgut boy broke off his singing and glanced upward quickly, as though he could see where Vasilov was crouching behind a bush. Then with a fearless air of disdain—which he was far from feeling, as he told Vasilov much later—the boy turned tenderly to his frightened pony.

Now Vasilov was aware of a curious feeling of guilt and remorse, and nakedness—as though his every act were being watched by some cold-faced judge. He furtively hid his sling-shot in the bushes, and then he stood up, further impelled by the feeling that he had already been seen.

Assuming a bland air of preoccupation, as though he had no idea anyone else was near, Vasilov went sliding and jumping down the rocky bank to the pebbled shore. Suddenly he turned, almost face to face with the Torgut boy, with a startled expression in his eyes, clear to Subutai as if the young Cossack had said, "What a start you gave me—I didn't know anyone was here!" And Vasilov then bent solicitously, whistling between his teeth, feeling the pony's foreleg in a professional manner copied from soldiers at the fort. . . .

That had been the beginning of their friendship.

Once they explored Sarepta together. They spent two days at the autumn fair, running errands for merchants, sleeping in the shadow of a booth at night. Their reward was some tobacco, which Vasilov had seen men chew

occasionally, instead of using a pipe. He and Subutai, misunderstanding the process, not only chewed but swallowed the stuff, for a time boasting and pretending to one another that they were enjoying the stature and trick of manhood thereby. But after a time they became so desperately ill that they could do nothing but lie on their bellies and glare at one another's greenish complexion, thinking, "Ah, but he looks much worse than I!"

Sometimes in winter, when Subutai's aimak was quartered near-by across the Volga, they would meet and fish through holes cut in the ice. Each learned something of the language, the mode of life, the troubles and superstitions of the other's people. . . . And once, when they were full-grown boys, they had spent a whole two weeks together in the winter, camping out and trapping for marten.

All these things, Vasilov recalled.

In the dark near-by, some cattle and sheep were stirring uneasily; a thin snow was still falling, but it seemed windless and warmer.

How close, Vasilov thought, he and Subutai had been—yet how far apart, really, they seemed these days! To the Cossack, Subutai and his people seemed changed somehow; they seemed like people walking in sleep, seeing and hearing things like ghosts—nothing seemed real. . . . He shuddered to recall Captain Dudin, a bundle of green lumps in a cart, the still-living remains of a being that had once bellowed and cracked a whip. How far away the Volga, the Fort Jenat! Ah, if only the Torguts had stayed and fought—and what could they possibly gain, running away, wandering all over the strange face of the earth? And what of himself—what had he in common, really, with Subutai and his people? Likely as not he would get Subutai in deeper trouble as time went on. If he could escape, if he could return to the Volga, somehow, then he might hide in the woods, find Pugatchev, hide under the Magyar woman's floor—and then some night!

He tried to peer through the cool and isolating flakes of snow, in the dark, to the south-west. Out there, beyond, there were only a few sentries—and then, freedom ! Near-by were the strange people, sleeping in the dark night, the sheep brushing like ghosts against his legs when he paced too far to the north. . . .

Ah, thought Vasilov uneasily, but his place was with Subutai—he couldn't flee without leave, it was up to his friend, the bestranged Torgut, the captain, Subutai !

Vasilov was glad when, through a hole in the clouds, the waning moon could at last be seen like a silver sickle gleaming in mountainous banks of snow, up there. . . . First he removed his coat from Subutai and then he woke him, saying :

"The moon's been up a little, but only now it came through the clouds."

Together, he and Subutai rode away from the slumbering camp and out to the end of the sentry line. It was quiet. Now and then wolves could be heard, far distant. The unbroken snow became more luminous as the moon rose. The snow, still falling, was thin and fine, like mist. Here on the wastes, the wind had almost ceased ; but far overhead the clouds were blown and tattered, moving at great speed, as though pursued by a mighty wind from the moon. Finally Subutai said :

"The snow is too deep, too soft."

"For what ?"

"For travel."

"Why, are we going somewhere ?" said Vasilov, ingenuously.

Subutai smiled.

"How I'd like to trap with you once more, my Russian brother," he said. "Those were good times. Remember when we caught a wild boar in the snare ?"

"How he slobbered and fought !"

"Yes, but you were the bold one, though !" said Subutai.

"Putting your arm down his throat, when we weren't yet sure he was dead!"

"But my heart was pounding, I'll tell you!" said Vasilov, laughing. "Nobody but kids would do a thing like that. . . . But remember the way you showed me how Grandma cooked the marmot—buried with hot stones in his stomach and a fire above?"

"Yes, she was a great one," Subutai said. "Now she's dead."

"All must die sometime, Subutai my brother."

"Yes," said Subutai sighing, "ah well. . . . Those times are no more, Vasilov. Now we go separate ways."

"I've given you great trouble—my life has cost you many sheep—"

"I give it all back to you gladly, just so you go in safety."

"But the snow is too soft, too deep."

"In a few days it will freeze. . . . You saw what has come of your captain?"

"No great loss!" Vasilov said, gruffly concealing his emotion. "Such fellows make life unpleasant—such men, perhaps, are the reason your people go one way, and mine another—"

"No people are more kindly than mine, but now evil things have come among us," said Subutai. "It is the will of God."

"Yes, perhaps it's the will of God."

"I saw people looking at you, Vasilov—many think you should lie in a cart like your captain, Dudin."

"I know, little Subutai," said Vasilov, sighing. "When the time comes, with your leave, I go. . . ."

But for a day or two the weather remained uncertain, warm and misting. Then came several days of clear warmth, during which the snow melted a little, settled, and packed more solidly on the Aral steppe. And after this,

the wind blew again, a cold rain fell that sleeted and crusted the snow. Only on the sixth day did the weather turn clear and cold.

During this time, Subutai learned what he could of the mood and condition of Zebek's people, of their herds and flocks, and of the extent of Zebek's personal wealth—which had increased under Lev's guidance and again more recently, since, because of the five hundred dead sheep he personally took of the thousand received from Gedesu to provision Subutai's men, he had five hundred the less to slaughter of his own flock. And during this time, too, Subutai tried not to think of Cedar-chab with her eyes downcast and Zebek holding her arm—a thought which occurred frequently, nevertheless, rendered more bitter by the fact of his own complete poverty and of Zebek's princely rank.

During these six days and nights while Subutai and his men patrolled the south-eastern waste-lands, only one incident occurred worth reporting. In the early dusk of the fifth day a small band of Kara-Kalpaks suddenly appeared, not far from where Subutai was riding with Vasilov. The Kara-Kalpaks were large, soft fellows, good herdsmen, but not warlike; they were allies of the Kirghiz of the Little Horde, however, and had probably been requested by Nurali's messengers to reconnoitre on this side of the Mugadir hills. They had been riding in the frozen bed of one of the few water-courses on the Aral plain, and, coming suddenly up the low bank, saw only Subutai and Vasilov at first. After a brief consultation among themselves, they fanned out and started galloping toward the two men, brandishing their spears in a half-hearted way. But when Subutai, shouting fiercely and riding straight toward them, was suddenly joined by a few other Torguts who were patrolling near-by, the Kara-Kalpaks turned and fled. After pursuing them a short distance, Subutai and his men turned back, laughing at the flight of their enemies. And

on the way back to the sentry line Subutai, winking at Vasilov, said :

“When Kara-Kalpaks go riding, the snow must be fine enough for even a woman to travel.”

It was on the next day, the sixth day, that Zebek, who had returned from Ubasha's ulus, summoned Subutai to his yurt. “Great Captain, young sir,” said Lev, who brought the message, “the Prince Zebek would like a personal report of the Kara-Kalpaks.”

Subutai followed Lev, feeling some misgivings. He had rarely seen Zebek at close hand, and had never really talked with him. But he knew much regarding the khan's cousin, from Batu and Norbo and the younger warriors, and from Temuru, too ; and none of the things Subutai knew of the prince made him feel less worried.

Zebek and Ubasha were descended from brothers, Chakdur-shap and Gund-shep, sons of the great khan, Ayouka. After Ayouka's death, these sons, both headstrong men, had been set aside in favour of the khan's weakest son, Cheren Donduk, under whose rule the authority of the khan was lessened and the Torgut people became vassals of the Russian tsars. When Cheren Donduk died, the son of his eldest brother became khan, a man named Donduk Ombo. Donduk Ombo was a strong khan, but not very wise, and his son Galdan Norbo rebelled against him. Galdan Norbo was driven into exile by his father, to Kazan, where his son Zebek-Dordzhi was born and where he himself died among the Russians, cursing his own people.

When Donduk Ombo died, the young Prince Zebek came back among the Torguts, claiming to be the rightful khan, since he was descended from Ayouka's eldest son. But the people had already chosen Donduk Taisha, son of Ayouka's second son, Chakdur-shap.

And once again, when Donduk Taisha died, Zebek claimed to be khan. He went among the Torguts, gaining some powerful friends, for he promised to divide the land among

them, as the boyars had done with the Russian people's land. But the people chose Ubasha, the young son of Donduk Taisha. Zebek fomented a plot against young Ubasha, but when this was discovered he fled to Tcherkask. Safe among the Russians, he claimed that the Torgut friends of Ubasha had tried to assassinate him, Zebek, the rightful khan of the people. The Tsarina had already approved the election of Ubasha ; but she devised a Torgut Council, the Sarga, of which Zebek would be president, and which would further undermine the khan's power. Under Zebek's urging, too, the Tsarina ceased making a gift of two thousand sacks of flour and two thousand golden coins each year to the Torgut people ; and instead, she sent one hundred coins a year to each member of the Sarga. . . .

Thus, Subutai knew, had been the story of Zebek and his struggle for power, until now. In recent years, Zebek had become far more subtle, no longer appearing to deny Ubasha's rightful place as khan. Instead, he had taken to demanding more power for the Chief Lama of the Torguts, Loosang, claiming that Ubasha was too tolerant of Shamanist heresies and of the Christian encroachment among their people. Too, he maintained that the Torgut lands should be divided among individuals, and he supported various other measures which he called reforms. Only in the last year, when he realized that the Tsarina's intention was to weaken not only Ubasha but himself, he had taken to militant speeches, strong arguments, for the return of the Torguts to their old home, Djungaria, now unpeopled. In short, he seemed to blow with the wind—"but always on his own axle," as Temuru once said. But from the first moment when the great migration seemed a certainty, Zebek had never once mentioned Djungaria as a goal ; and he seemed, really, like Ubasha, in such a time of hardship, to desire only the quickest road to well-being for his people.

Subutai knew, too, the stories about Zebek and his

squandered wealth—how he had lost most of the animals and wealth inherited from his grandfather, the Donduk Ombo, by inattention and by gambling in the Russian towns—and how he was reputed to have stayed up six and eight nights in a row, with his Russian friends, drinking, gambling, and enjoying their women ; until at thirty-five, although his face was still attractive, he looked dissolute and gaunt-souled, and had great difficulty sleeping at night. . . .

Such, then, was the man Subutai now went uneasily to meet.

Zebek's yurt, contrary to the rumours of his poverty, was richly furnished. The interior walls were hung with silken tapestries, and there were several Russian beds along the walls. The thing that most struck Subutai, entering clumsily and looking around, was that Zebek, the champion of the church, had no Buddhist altar where it should have been opposite the door. There was a fine glowing fire in the brazier. And Zebek, with his feet covered by a pile of red Turkey rugs, was seated at a table of French workmanship, busily engaged with a quill.

After he had kept Subutai waiting a short time, Zebek raised his head and passed a hand over his face in a weary gesture. In the resultant interview, his manner with Subutai was pleasant, but bored and patronizing. He asked the young warrior many questions, about the Kara-Kalpaks and about his own men. And then he said :

" But tell me, captain—isn't it true, the Kara-Kalpaks are a bunch of old women ? "

" By themselves, yes, because they don't like to fight," said Subutai. " But not when the Kirghiz stand behind them with lances and guns."

Zebek smiled up at the young fellow who stood awkwardly on the far side of his French desk. How could he ever have thought suspiciously of such a mere boy ? Zebek raised a strong brown hand, not aged like his face, and said :

" Ah well, but the Princess Cedar-chab tells me you are

the greatest fighter of all our young men—good enough to fight a troop of Kara-Kalpaks all by yourself, I'll wager ! ”

Subutai flushed and shuffled his feet, stammering :

“ Well, but—but the Princess—but I haven't fought yet, really——”

“ Nonsense,” said Zebek with a weary smile, “ Beran is a fine fighter. . . . But now, captain—regarding these cowardly Kara-Kalpaks.”

He went on to point out that little was to be feared from such a source ; and he requested Subutai not to alarm Ubasha unduly, when the troops returned to their own ulus within a day or two, with any frightening stories about the really un-warlike peoples who might try to hinder the Torguts' entry into Asia.

“ I suppose you all know, we plan to travel still eastward from here ? ” Zebek said.

Subutai not only had heard this rumour himself, but it seemed to have spread generally even among the people of Zebek's ulus.

“ Yes, it's rather well-known we go on,” he said.

“ Ah ! and what have you heard ? ”

“ Well,” Subutai said, feeling uneasy again, “ some people complain—but most think it's a good thing, since there seems little fodder here for even such animals as are left.”

“ Good,” said Zebek, pointing his quill at Subutai, “ good ! ”

For a time he tapped on the desk with the quill but finally he said, still pleasantly :

“ Now, captain—I understand you have a Cossack whom you let ride around free as one of your own men.”

Subutai wet his lips and said :

“ But——”

“ It would be a matter of great significance to our people,” Zebek said firmly, “ if he should get loose. Supposing he should escape—naturally, he'd first of all seek the Cossack

troops, and he'd spread word about how drastically we've been forced to deal with Dudin and the rest. This would make any chance of our return to the Volga, captain, out of the question."

"But we aren't going back," said Subutai, bewildered, "I thought we had decided——"

"The council has decided, captain," said Zebek, smiling and looking frankly at Subutai. "What about yourself? Do you want to return?"

"Never!" said Subutai.

"Ah well," said Zebek, who had been sitting forward, now sinking back in his French chair. "But you understand—I must ask you to assume full responsibility in this matter. You understand what I say, captain?"

Thus the interview closed; and Subutai, unable to answer, unable to put his finger on what he intuitively felt to be some hidden trick of Zebek's, blushed and mumbled something in reply, and was dismissed.

Only later, thinking over what had been said, like a man going back over the snow to find where he had lost his way, Subutai discovered that Zebek had somehow put him in the position of determining the direction the horde might take. Clearly enough, he saw that Zebek wanted the Cossack to escape, perhaps to make sure that Ubasha—whose vacillating nature Subutai had vaguely come to realize—might raise no further doubts regarding a decision the Sarga had already made.

Yes, thought Subutai, this must have been the whole meaning and purpose of the interview—and as such, it was perhaps a good thing to let Vasilov go. Even from the viewpoint of the people it would be a good thing—making them act on a decision, instead of allowing them to dissent and argue again. For Subutai had come to feel strongly that the Torguts must never return—that the good of his people lay somewhere else, beyond, over the Mugadir, somewhere in Asia.

The only thing—still puzzling him, even when he had decided that in freeing Vasilov he should be acting in the mutual interest of both friend and people—the one small irritating thought was that in so doing, now that he had talked with Zebek, and even though it might be a doubly good thing, he, Subutai, would somehow become an accomplice of Zebek. . . .

Nevertheless, that night he let Vasilov go.

It was a cold, clear night—moonless, for the new moon of Chagan-Sara was only a day away—quiet, windless, and intensely cold. The stars glittered, the frozen snow sparkled like silver.

Vasilov and Subutai embraced, neither one of them able to say a word. The Torgut had given Beran's horse to his Cossack friend as a parting gift. And thus, far beyond the end of the sentry line, in a dark cold wilderness, they took leave of one another for ever, as though the Ural divide had already risen between them.

Only a short distance to the east lay the vast strange regions of Asia ; and to the west, over snow now frozen so solid a horse could travel it like a rock, were the Caspian outposts of Russia and Europe. . . .

Sadly Subutai watched his friend ride away, dwindle in size, merely a black speck far on the dim glimmering snow.

Now Subutai felt alone, desperately alone for a time, committed to loneliness—for all the familiar things of his youth were now gone, the last traces of Europe, the forts and domes and bells so fascinating once, gone somehow for good with Vasilov. Gone too, with Grandma, was the whole intimate paraphernalia of his earlier life, yurts, house altars, a brazier of coals and a warm dry bed, even the world of cattle and sheep. In that moment, Subutai felt done for ever with all such things, committed to a new way of life—the only way a man could follow, now, the lonely vigil and proud melancholy of a warrior. Even though

some might try holding to the old domestic ways of life—treating as merely an unseasonal migration what was now, really, to become an act of legendary sweep—this was no longer possible for Subutai ; and he sat his white horse in the dark, lonely and apart among his own people.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



During these six days, the slaughter of animals had been carried out all through the horde, and preparations had already been started for Chagan-Sara, the Feast of the White Month, the New Year's moon. In all the hoshuns there was great activity and excitement.

The meat of slaughtered cattle and sheep had been frozen, salted, and dried in the cold wind.

Women smoked the cattle hides until they became translucent as horn. Skins were tanned with a mixture of salt and a residue of milk curds left after arrack was made, sometimes with a mixture of salt and ashes. The dressed skins were rubbed with putrid livers from the slaughtered sheep, mixed with milk and sour cream. The hides were made into, or saved to be made into, leather straps and boots, bottles, long whips for tending sheep, jars, and many new shields and breast-plates.

Sheepskins were cured, and dressed, and made ready for wear.

From the poorer wool, new felts were made. The wool was first wetted and beaten with sticks. Women's hands became raw, cracked and chilblained, from boiling snow for water and working the wet wool. Then the felts were pressed dry as possible and tied to ponies' tails, letting the ponies drag them across the snow to give them a proper finish.

Loose wool and camel's hair were gathered and made into ropes.

In this time, too, men saw to their weapons and armour.

Among the people there was much speculation, and some complaint, regarding the order to kill half their animals. A rumour spread among the hoshuns that the council had decided to cross the Mugadir into Asia, rather than to remain here and seek terms with the Tsarina. Certain people said :

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, we're going a long way—maybe all the way to Djungaria. Otherwise, it would be silly to slaughter our animals, isn't it so?"

"Not Djungaria," others said wisely. "We're going to the land of the Turgai, near Lake Chalkhar."

"Nonsense," still others insisted, "we're staying right here. I have it on good authority—it's all a matter of poor forage, and saving the best of our herds."

"Why, listen—if that were true, the order would have been to widen camp, not to slaughter. No, it's quite plain—we're just waiting for Chagan-Sara, and then we're moving again."

The argument waged back and forth. Some people insisted that, regardless of the outcome, it was a good thing to destroy the poorest of their herds and flocks, anyway. Such people argued that animals, like men, became weak and soft when good times lasted too long ; these were the same people who believed that death, war, and pestilence were benevolent acts of God to keep people strong and fit. Such people, however, were only a few. Most of the Torguts slaughtered their animals with misgivings, and even with sorrow. They had worked hard to improve and increase their cattle and sheep, and it seemed wanton to kill on such a large scale, no matter what the cause. And even when the rumour of further migration became generally accepted among the people, none the less most of them grumbled :

"No matter—even should we go twice as far as we've

come, still, can there be no forage? We've done pretty well so far——"

"Yes, by feeding the animals all of last summer's forage we brought along!" some people pointed out.

"Perhaps," admitted the others. "But again, animals travel more easily on their own feet, isn't it so?"

"The slower, then. This way, we'll be able to travel so fast the Russians will never find us."

And still others, looking at the huge stacks of carcasses all about, said with gloomy humour:

"Well, no matter what comes, at least we shan't want for food!"

During these days, too, there was much sickness among the people, and the lamas and the shamans were kept busy.

The shamans mastered human aches and diseases by incantation; their remedies appealed, somehow, to the more superstitious and ignorant among the people.

The lamas pretended to smile tolerantly at such unscientific therapy; but actually, they were deeply grieved that god rather capriciously allowed the shamans as many cures as themselves.

The lamas' principal specific was gin-seng, "the little root in the shape of a man," a remedy whereby all the ills common to man were combated. But their supply of gin-seng and various herbs came from Tibet, where all things were endowed with special virtue; and no caravan had arrived from the Holy Land for several years. The lack of such remedies was not a real obstacle, however, since the actual presence of god was not essential to do his work—his name being quite enough, axiomatically. So the lamas, for a proper fee, scribbled recipes in Tibetan script on little papers, made like wafers from crushed corn-stalks and sheep's hair; and they solemnly fed these transubstantiations of god's body and wisdom to their devout and hopeful patients.

Thus the lamas had the advantage, among such wiser and less superstitious people ; but they had little or no success among the animals.

For instance the camels, many of whom were suffering from colds and glanders, would spit with the fierce ill-humour of the ignorant when such wafers and pellets of paper were offered them. Their feet were sore from stones under the snow and jagged ice ; some had mange, their hides festering with foul-smelling wounds. They groaned and spit, and shied irritably away from the lamas.

The shamans, who relied on herbs and medicaments of the ordinary variety, as well as on incantations more legendary than the days of Genghis Khan, achieved many cures among the animals. The camels submitted, although with ill grace, to such remedies as goat-broth for mange, tobacco rubbed astringently on their wounds, tamarisk leaves for colds. They even let themselves be thrown on their sides in the snow while the shamans, placing strips of leather over their sore feet, pierced the callosities of their hooves with thongs to bind the leather shoes in place.

This success of the shamans among the animals was very cleverly explained by the lamas. The shamans, they said, were priests of a god who sat lower in the altar of gods than Buddha. Likewise, in the order of man and animal, there were many ranks and grades of incarnation. It was natural, therefore, that the shamans should achieve lucky cures with ordinary remedies, among the animals and the lower incarnations of men. But for cures among the higher incarnations, only the supreme wisdom of the lamas would suffice.

The lamas were very clever in such metaphysical debates. Sometimes the shamans, resenting the high fees the lamas received for their paper pills inscribed with Tibetan words, would callously suggest that a translation of these foreign words might be well—to allow people, so to speak, to get hold of god with a more everyday comprehension. The

lamas invariably replied that, even if they themselves were unable to say what the curious words meant, surely their meaning was known to god and would, accordingly, have the proper effect.

In spite of these occasional conflicts, the two priesthoods impinged only slightly on one another's sphere of influence. Generally speaking, the lamas attended the rich, gaining large fees and prestige—while the shamans, attending the animals and the poor, gained many small fees and a close bond with the majority of the people. Thus the good work, sacred and secular, continued among all classes of men and animals during this busy time.

People like Gedesu and Ghashun were far from idle these days.

"Look here," Gedesu said pettishly one time to Merghen, "people who think I have an easy time just because I'm successful—they're fools. I work fifty times as hard—and then, all the things I have to worry about!"

Merghen shrugged.

"Perhaps your life wouldn't be so hard," he said cynically, "if you hadn't taken sheep, one way and another, from nearly every man in sight."

"The very fact that you work for me," said Gedesu, after a moment's reflection, "proves I'm better fitted to own your flock than you are."

"You're a liar, a skinflint, a man without any god but your belly," Merghen said boldly, "and an old woman, too—since you haven't the guts of a man."

This sort of thing exasperated Gedesu. Among his neighbours, more and more people were beginning to regard him with mockery instead of respect, with hatred instead of envy.

"To show them my true nature," he thought irritably, "what must I do?"

He felt that an injustice was being done him, blindly, since his neighbours failed to see that his wealth was really a

burden he dutifully bore, or that his cowardice, as they called it, really came from compassion and forgiveness.

"Come," he thought angrily, "I can't waste time on such things. There's the matter of all these animals. . . . Let them know, at least, I'm a godly man."

Adopting a device of the lamas, Gedesu unearthed a bone rosary, to demonstrate his godliness and facilitate his counting of animals at the same time.

"What's come over Gedesu?" some people said, seeing him thus preoccupied with his beads amid the slaughter and dressing of meat.

"Oh," said other folks—the kind always ready to impute the worst intention to devout acts of the rich—"oh, he's just counting how many sheep he lost by sleeping too soundly at night."

Gedesu was surprised to learn the full extent of his cattle and sheep. Eight thousand two hundred and forty sheep—who could have guessed? The eight thousand, perhaps—but surely not the two hundred and forty!

The idea of slaughtering less than half of his animals occurred to Gedesu. But Ubasha, suspecting that some people might think of such a thing, sent agents all through his ulus to see that the wealthy took no such advantage.

At night, Gedesu brooded uncomfortably, wishing that the Jew, Lev Zolotsky, were here to counsel him. . . . How could he and Ghashun eat four thousand one hundred and twenty sheep? And even granting that such feats of gluttony might be accomplished in time, it was sacrilege to think these things—like a man eating half his body with no perceptible gain! . . . Finally, thinking of his neighbours, Gedesu concocted a scheme.

To transport such a cargo of meat, he would need a great many carts.

He rode through his neighbours' hoshuns casually, yet eyeing their carts and equipment and flocks with a practised eye. Here and there he noted carts in good condition,

various articles of value, casting up quickly in his mind their worth in sheep. . . . He also noted that some people, people with small flocks, hadn't carried out the decreed slaughter, it seemed. This made him genuinely angry, as though he himself had been cheated, somehow.

"So that's what we've come to!" he said bitterly. "Discrimination against a man, just because he's been more careful and successful than others!"

"But if we destroy half our flocks," these people said, "then we'll not have enough for milk and wool, since we have so few animals. In such case, a man might as well kill all—for flocks can't be renewed from half of nothing!"

"Ah, what a pity!" Gedesu now said, assuming a pious expression. "Surely, there's truth in such a complaint. . . . How many sheep did you say, neighbour, one hundred? What would you say," he went on, in a confiding whisper, "to one hundred of my sheep? Then you'd have an equal number of live and dead, and nobody could tell!"

"Why, such a thing would be fine indeed! Look, Aunt Sarkhu—look at this—here's our good neighbour Gedesu, offering us some of his slaughtered sheep!"

"I try to do good," Gedesu said, "in my own way."

"What does he want here?" Sarkhu said suspiciously. "He'll wring us dry of everything we own."

"Go away, Sarkhu—get back to your work—you don't know anything about such matters!" Gedesu's neighbour said.

"I know it cost you a pretty penny to get rid of the khan's agent!" Sarkhu cried sharply. "This one will milk you dry as an old cow, I warn!"

When Aunt Sarkhu had gone, Gedesu said softly:

"Why, neighbour, all I'd like in return is yonder cart and a few little things—perhaps that copper pot, a few coins if you have any, things of little or no use to you."

"It's a bargain, then, certainly it is! What do women know of such things?" the neighbour cried. "Here,

Sarkhu ! Pichak ! Clear this rubbish from yonder cart ! Gedesu our good neighbour takes it home. . . .”

But when the cart had been drawn through the clearings and corridors of snow to Gedesu's hoshun and one hundred dead sheep had been stacked rigid as stone to one side, the man scratched his head and said :

“ Good neighbour Gedesu, how do I carry my sheep ? ”

“ That's true,” Gedesu said. He seemed to ponder the problem deeply—while his neighbour, to convince himself that the bargain was nevertheless good, kept slapping the frozen meat and exclaiming over its solidity. Finally Gedesu said, “ Well, I'll tell you. Supposing I carry your sheep in my cart.”

“ Why, such a thing would be fine indeed ! ”

“ Yet in so doing,” Gedesu reflected, “ there will be no room for my own carcasses.”

“ Ah, that's bad.”

“ And in addition, there'll be the feeding of the oxen, the care, the wear on the cart——”

“ That's not right, that's not a good bargain for you.”

“ But how would it be,” said Gedesu, squinting with his good eye, “ how would it do if, for conveying your meat, neighbour, I took a small amount for myself—say, half ? ”

“ Fifty, you say ? I don't know. . . . Still, that leaves me fifty, isn't it so ? ”

“ And someone to drive the cart, too,” Gedesu added quickly. “ It's a small fee, considered every which-way. . . . After all, neighbour, you had no meat to start with, at all, and now you have fifty.”

“ That's true—it's like you've given me fifty, in a way of speaking. Isn't it so ? ”

Thus, in devious ways, Gedesu managed to turn a large portion of his slaughtered sheep into tangible and more permanent forms of wealth—carts, pots, silver and gold ornaments, a few pieces of Chinese jade, Russian coins, including silver and some golden roubles as well as copper

money—while, at the same time, he managed to regain more than half of his bartered sheep as a fee for the use of his carts.

These successes restored his self-esteem, but they neither won the respect of his neighbours nor solved the problem of his grandmother's wealth. Whenever Gedesu approached Grandma's animals, Tenek capered about like a madman, brandishing an axe, frothing at the lips, shouting wild threats at Gedesu. And the people became more angry than ever at his cleverness ; now they had time again, like lazy good-for-nothings, to send their children bleating like sheep at Gedesu—as though he were some kind of a clown, a fat fool of a man ! . . . Gedesu turned these matters over and over again in his mind, but he could find no solution.

On the day before Chagan-Sara, however, a chance came to settle both problems at once.

A little girl, sent by her own grandmother, an old friend of Grandma's, brought a small offering of butter to the cairn of snow-blocks Temuru had ordered built over the frozen body where the tent had been. Tenek, not seeming to mind the cold, was lying there with some of Grandma's dogs. He leaped to his feet and began thrashing the air with his axe, like a man in the midst of a nightmare. The little girl dropped the butter-god, the dogs licked it up. The axe struck her arm, a glancing blow which grazed the skin and made it bleed. She ran home shrieking. . . .

There was considerable talk of what should be done. Gedesu was quite outspoken.

"According to our law," he said, "a madman is an outcast and may be killed on sight. Such a man is Tenek."

Others were reluctant to take such drastic action in the case of the poor hump-back. It was true, they agreed, something had to be done. But they shook their heads dolefully, recalling how harmless Tenek had always been. Still others had superstitious scruples, feeling that bad luck

would come from any hostile act toward a man whose deformed body obviously housed such demons. All seemed inclined, as though by common agreement, to leave the matter to Gedesu.

"After all, he was your grandmother's man," they said, "it's your grandmother's tomb. . . ."

That night, Gedesu got his musket and began to polish the silver mountings.

"Subutai will be angry," said Ghashun.

Gedesu sputtered.

"Since when am I afraid of Subutai?" he said. "This is according to law. The others are afraid—not I!"

He laid the musket aside and stirred up the argol coals in the brazier. Then he took Beran's chain-mail armour from the top of a chest, and tried to get it over his head. He managed to tear and force the armour part way down over his flesh, and there it stuck.

Ghashun burst out laughing, bitterly.

"What a sight!" she said. "If Subutai could only see you now!"

Puffing and red in the face, he managed to pull the armour back over his head again. With his head bent, he began picking at some of the silver links with a knife, trying to split the armour down the back.

"Yes, I see the whole thing," he muttered. "It's Subutai-this and Subutai-that. . . . I see what you mean. You had to take his friend, you couldn't get him to do it, eh? No wonder, with your face like a goat's behind!"

"Shut up, I warn you!" cried Ghashun, trembling.

Gedesu continued to probe with his knife.

"Aha," he said, knowingly, "don't think I'm not right! Look at your face—red as raw leather——"

"I warned you!" shrieked Ghashun, springing toward his gun.

But Gedesu, moving swiftly for a man of such bulk, knocked her against the wall of the yurt. She lay there

sobbing. He returned to his place, sitting on the musket and continuing to pick the links of the armour apart.

She began to mutter.

"Ah God," she said, "I wear out my fingers, my face, grubbing for sheep and cattle—no wonder I look as I do. And then he says this and does that. . . . Does he curse at his own empty eye? his finger, cut from his hand? Yet my face, the lines, the hardness, the things gone from it, these things, too, have earned wealth——"

When she talked like this it was impossible for Gedesu to remain angry with her. He stood up; he had managed to open the chain-mail down the back, and now he began forcing it over his head again. When he thought about how she might return to her father with some of their sheep, Gedesu felt a great compassion for his wife.

"Come, pretty Ghashun," he wanted to say, "with a face like the sun or stars, with a face like a soft, beautiful white mare!"

He picked up the Persian helmet and pressed it down on his head. How warlike he felt, how strong! He reached for the silver musket, suffering a little difficulty in bending, and turned to Ghashun.

"My dear wife," he finally said, his voice sounding rich as gold from under the metal casque on his head. "Let us forget about Subutai. . . . The question is Tenek. In addition to being mad, he has stolen our grandmother's wealth. Someone must deal firmly with such a man."

She sniffled and said:

"But it's bad luck—it's bad luck to kill a hunch-back——"

Gedesu shouldered the musket bravely.

"Gedesu will do a man's duty," he said, "good luck or bad."

With these words, he marched from the yurt.

Outside, it was already dark. A few children whom he passed scampered away with shrieks of fright. Indeed, Gedesu was a fearsome apparition, clad in star-lit armour,

vapour curling out from under his metal casque, shouldering a silver-mounted musket. He strode on, mindless of shrieks and laughter. It was a cold night, the snow crunched and creaked underfoot. The pleasant bustle of Chagan-Sara Eve, reassuringly, was all about. The stars were bright.

Tenek lay with the dogs on the dull white cairn of snow ; the axe had fallen from his hand, and he seemed to sleep. . . .

The sound of the musket—with the muzzle pressed into Tenek's back, just below the hump—was less frightening than Gedesu had expected. Perhaps it was the armour, the casque on his head, that altered the sound. But the frightening thing was, the cairn caved in—Tenek's body tumbled from sight.

Gedesu crept off a short distance. All was quiet, dogs barked somewhere. Yet now that the act was done, now that nobody came running to compliment him on a brave act well done, Gedesu felt less certain and easy than ever. Looking back at the broken cairn, he began to shiver like a cold man, he slunk deeper among the sheep. The cold and remorseless eyes of Grandma, the bright wild hatred of Tenek's eyes, circled him in the dark. Casual, distant sounds became for Gedesu the ghostly portents of revenge for his act of bravado. Everywhere, there seemed whispers and murmurings in the dark. Someone came riding toward the cairn. Gedesu crouched down, cold and tremulous in the silver armour. All about him, the sheep bleated, dogs howled in the starlight, the wind made a hollow sound blowing over the broken tomb of snow. . . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Chagan-Sara ! What happy memories the festival recalled to Subutai—everywhere, the happy bustling, the sound of music, the smell of good things cooking !

But it was different now, without Grandma.

Returning from Zebek's ulus, Subutai rode for many miles through the corridors and clearings of Torgut hoshuns spread over the Aral plain like a vast and labyrinthine city. A gay, excited hum rose from the tents and yurts and the hoshun squares where people were already gathering around great crackling fires. Overhead the sky was glazed with nightfall and stars—like a festival cake, Grandma used to say. . . . Subutai felt more sombre and lonely than ever.

Now and then he passed a white temple yurt. One of them, the door open, was filled with people. Subutai paused, looking in.

On either side of the door, large ornamental braziers were burning and warming the air drawn through the opening ; smoke and the warm sour air from the depths of the yurt rose through a ventilator cowl of iron in the roof. It was a large yurt, one of the more important temples, and the interior walls were hung with coloured scrolls and tapestries in honour of the occasion.

Subutai could see the altar, over the heads of people—the gods on the top level, the offerings on the lower dais. Among the offerings were those marvellously sculptured flowers, principally lotus blossoms, which Subutai had always admired.

One thing that he could dimly recall from his brother Gedesu's youth—before Gedesu became greedy, when he was studying for the priesthood ; before Gedesu was told he could never become a lama unless he brought two thousand sheep into the church—was the fascinating skill with which Gedesu had been able to fashion such flowers and things from butter. But butter was scarce, now, and so most of the offerings were modelled in tallow ; some were already drooping like flowers dying for lack of cool fresh water. Subutai stared at the altar, the long slender columns and the delicate lace-like tapestry of stuccoed brick, coloured and fragile as a mirage in the shimmering sky of spring. Many lamp bowls were burning, with wicks that sputtered and then burned clear, some with blue and greenish and some with pure white fire.

There were two lamas at the altar, chanting and praying, dressed in long scarlet robes, with yellow hoods surmounted by mitres. To one side, priests of the second and third class were seated on a low platform, making a music that was sweet and melancholy, sometimes disharmonic, always hypnotic. On this festal occasion, all the instruments were in use—timbrels, the Chinese gongs and cymbals made of copper and brass, horns made of shells from the sea, copper flageolets, drums, and two long telescopic horns which had to be supported on props. The orchestral priests wore dresses of many bright colours, richly brocaded with silver and gold, special gowns for such a time as Chagan-Sara.

All of these things—the sweet and acrid incense, the glitter and the wealth, the music—had formerly entranced Subutai. But to-night all seemed meaningless, alien to the time and place. Most of the worshippers looked poor, cold, and homeless in the rich temple yurt, facing a New Year with dwindling hope. But perhaps, thought Subutai, it was really his weariness, the monotony of sentry duty, the loss of Grandma and Vasilov, a personal ill-humour, that made him feel so

bleak, so dull with disinterest. . . . Oppressed by loneliness and disenchantment, he turned away at last from the temple yurt.

He collided with Bagha the shaman.

"What—you here?" said Bagha. "But why so pensive and sad?"

Subutai shrugged.

"I don't know—perhaps they ought to be thinking of more serious things," he said, "such as, for instance, what lies beyond the Mugadir."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Bagha. "People are dumb. Here I cure a man's camel and I get a sheep's tail; I cure Yelden's wife of the devils, and I get a bowl of broth and 'What a great magical man you are!'" he mimicked. "But then look—what do people do? They flock to the temples like sheep, and they bring butter and rich things, and they stare at the priests' horns as though music were some kind of a cure-all; and they fasten their eyes on the lamas' behinds as though golden eggs were going to drop into their hands any minute. . . ."

"Look here, Subutai. One of the Yellow-Hats wanted to make a hole in your Grandma's head—for her spirit to escape," he said. But I knew that all he wanted was some of her sheep. So I said to Temuru, 'He wants some of her sheep, that's all.' And I said to the Yellow-Hat, 'Listen,' I said, 'she never held exactly to those ideas. It was always Bagha who kept her from loss and disease. And she had much too big a spirit,' I said, 'for a little hole in the top of her head. Her spirit was as big as all outdoors, and you couldn't make a hole big enough,' I told him. . . . So I separated her body and spirit the proper way, beating off the devils trying to hold her prisoner in the dead flesh—I freed her, I kept calling to her, 'Go ahead, Linga, go ahead!' all the way over the long bridge, until she was safe and happy at last in the White Palace."

"Thank you, Bagha," said Subutai, smiling a little,

touched deeply, "but I'm sorry, I have nothing left to give——"

"That's all right," Bagha said gruffly, "I did it for nothing. I liked the old lady—often she gave me a whole sheep at a time. . . . But look. Do you remember the little matter we talked about, one night?"

"What's that?"

"The matter of a certain person," Bagha said with polite delicacy. Subutai flushed abruptly. Bagha peered at him in the dark and said, "I see you remember. . . ." He cleared his throat several times, and then he said, "I didn't want you to think I've been sitting idle. First of all, I hit on the idea of Ghashun and the Cossack."

"You?" Subutai said incredulously.

"Why certainly," said Bagha, defensively, "how else? By incantation—well, and by shoving the arrack jug under the tent. It was mighty cold, waiting in the snow, I tell you. I waited until I was sure what they were up to, and then I shoved the jug in, next to them."

Subutai laughed.

"Even so," he said, "I don't see how it helps much—it cost me a hundred sheep and the armour I won from Beran."

"He doesn't see!" Bagha cried excitedly. "He doesn't see that, now, nobody will believe her word! . . . Look, Subutai—a jealous woman is worse than ten thousand devils, isn't it so? If she's virtuous, to boot, then many may listen to her malicious poison. But let her once be caught in sin and drunkenness, then none will listen—her fangs are drawn, and her devils, unable to damage others, begin to eat at her own bowels."

"Perhaps you're right," said Subutai.

"Certainly I'm right!" said Bagha. "Now, with the proper use of magic and incantation, I'll have her under the control of powerful spirits who'll keep her harmless as an old bitch with no teeth."

"Yes, but that part, Bagha, that's nonsense—about the magic. You just told me you did it with arrack."

"There you go! Show a man one trick he can understand, and he thinks there's nothing to it! . . . Next thing you'll be running to the lamas like all the rest," Bagha said aggrievedly, "forgetting your old friend Bagha. . . . And just when I was going to tell you what I learned from the bones, too, about a certain person," he added mysteriously.

"Ah—forgive me, Bagha! Tell me—what did you learn?"

"Oho! Now you change your tune fast enough. 'Sweet Bagha, dear Bagha, O wise magical Bagha!' . . . No thanks—I don't tell things to disbelievers."

"But Bagha, I believe!"

"Well then," said Bagha, appeased a little, "the bone steamed a bit, sweating a few drops of moisture. 'Ah, she's unhappy about something,' I thought. . . . As a matter of fact, I saw her the next day—at a distance, you know, but I could see her eyes had been wet——"

"Go on, Bagha!"

"Then all of a sudden, I put a new bone in the fire. Mind you, this was all beyond our bargain."

"Never mind, I'll make it up to you, Bagha. What shade was the first bone?"

"White, naturally."

"Yes, white it would be. . . . But then, the new bone—what shade?"

"It, too, was white."

"Ah," said Subutai heavily, "then it wasn't my bone."

Bagha wrinkled his forehead, like a merchant who has made a mistake in his customer's identity.

"But your father's the White Bone, isn't it so?" he said.

"Yes, so he was made. But I'm still of the Black Bone, a free shepherd without sheep, a warrior perhaps."

"So it was," Bagha said eagerly, "there was blood on this new bone."

"Yet it was white."

"Not actually. In the fire, you see, immediately it became black with smoke."

"Ah !"

"Yes, the other was white all along, steaming a little. But this new bone became black."

"And then ?"

"Then the first bone rolled toward the second."

"By itself ?"

"By itself. The steam dried away mighty fast, I tell you—and then what merry sparks went up ! The new bone became white as the first, would you believe it ? There they were—sparks going up like laughter !"

"Bagha, a million thanks !"

"Hey—what's your hurry ?" Bagha shouted after Subutai. "Don't forget old Bagha when you become rich !"

"Never !" Subutai called back.

Now he rode rapidly as possible through the hoshuns.

How gay everything was—music, laughter, good things to eat and drink—like old times almost ! And how good of Ubasha, too, to summon him home this night !

Three enormous yurts had been raised for the khan and his family, with inter-connecting doors. Around these yurts there was great activity. Throngs of people stood about, watching great fires in the clearing, where whole cattle and sheep were being cooked. The air was filled with appetizing odours of charred flesh and hot dripping fat ; the people were commenting excitedly on the skill of the cooks.

Subutai sprang from his horse and was ushered into the khan's presence.

Ubasha waved him aside, for a moment. He was sitting cross-legged on a rich Turkey carpet, studying some China ware. There were some small wine pots with air holes and little spouts, belonging to the "green family" of biscuit enamel. But the two large pieces that Ubasha was studying most closely had been set directly before him, so that they

obscured all the small pots and bowls. One of these large pieces was a tall tea-pot of pure white porcelain, glazed with blue and golden butterflies, grasses, flowers. The other was one of the great Black Hawthorn vases, tall as a child, a work of extreme simplicity by art. . . . These things Ubasha studied, like one trying to store the memory of some fleeting beauty in his head.

"How can I destroy such things?" he said softly, as though speaking to himself, unaware of Subutai's presence. "All the way from the Chinese khan they came, by Tu-li-shin—a gift of great beauty to Ayouka, my own great-grandfather——"

He lapsed into silence again; and then after a time he looked up, as though seeing Subutai for the first time.

"Well—could you destroy them, soldier?" he said. "They take much room in the carts."

"But," said Subutai, unsure what answer was expected of him, "but need they be destroyed, then?"

"Yes, we must set an example," Ubasha said. "For who knows how far we go? There are many things we must take, few carts. Such things as the slaughtered animals, these are things to think about now. And all manner of poor useless things of beauty, such things must be left behind. Ah, butterflies, flowers!" he said softly again, as though he were alone, "could we bury you under the snow, perhaps? Ah no—for what happens to flowers, the hawthorn, the butterfly wings, when summer loosens her grasp? Do they remain somewhere, green and sweet, blue as the summer sky, golden as air, waiting for winter to trample their wings? Rather when summer retreats, looking back over her shoulder with gentle melancholy, they crumble to dust. . . ."

"Tell me," he said abruptly to Subutai. "Did you learn the extent of Zebek's wealth?"

"Nearly as I could learn," said Subutai, who was embarrassed by the khan's mood, "there are fewer than three

thousand sheep, and not above one hundred head of cattle."

"Ah, so many!" said Ubasha. "Hm! somehow his wealth has increased. . . . But good—many thanks!" he said. "And now, what's this I learn of your Cossack? Zebek tells me you let him escape," Ubasha said pleasantly.

Subutai flushed and said:

"He was my friend. For his life I gave my last sheep. There was a long friendship between us, beautiful as yonder Chinese pots—no more could I see him destroyed."

"Well spoken," Ubasha said softly. "Now, go to the aimak of Momotubash. There you will find the Princess Cedar-chab, distributing her annual fund, with her the Prince Zebek. Remain with Cedar-chab, if you please, and ask Zebek to come to me. . . . Wait—hand me yonder fire-tong—"

When Subutai had done this, the khan struck the Black Hawthorn vase several light blows. The object gave off a deep silver tone, like a muffled bell. Ubasha said meditatively:

"Surely I am a man of peace—yet to go in peace, days like these, one must go unencumbered with friendship or beauty."

And squeezing his eyes tight shut, he struck the vase a great blow. Subutai moved away, silently as he could. Near the door of the yurt, it seemed to Subutai that he heard the khan sob; and he fled. . . .

Zebek and Cedar-chab, in the aimak of Momotubash, a few miles away, were visiting some poor families among whom there were many sick and comfortless because of the cold and the hardship of mid-winter travel.

In most cases, the best shelter such people had been able to contrive was still inadequate. Those fortunate enough to own two carts had stretched tent-cloths for a roof, with snow banked around the carts for walls. In cases where there was only one cart, shelter was still more limited.

Subutai found Cedar-chab in one such family enclosure. There was little room, she was sitting with her legs doubled under her—an uncomfortable position, obviously, but she was smiling as though quite at ease.

Zebek had tried to crouch beside her, for a time, smiling politely, sipping some of the wretched millet-water which his host, overwhelmed by such visitors, had made his wife prepare hurriedly. But overcome by the nauseous odours of four dirty children, one of whom was sick ; of several mangy dogs ; of a grandmother dying of lung trouble with much coughing and spitting ; of a sick lamb which the little sick girl had saved from slaughter by demanding it as a pet ; and further nauseated by the effusive but uncultured politeness of his host and hostess, Zebek had felt forced to retreat into the cold air.

When Subutai gave Zebek the message from Ubasha, at first the prince frowned and made an impatient gesture. Then suddenly he smiled, gave Subutai a friendly stroke on the arm, and called for his horse. He rode off without looking back.

Subutai shrugged.

Inside the shelter he could hear Cedar-chab's voice. His face grew pale, he trembled as he crouched to enter. Cedar-chab, without seeming to know that Subutai was squatting beside her, went on conversing with the sick girl.

The stuffy shelter was lit by a single tallow lamp, the light of which flickered violently every time the old lady coughed. Near her some Tibetan incense which Cedar-chab had brought was smouldering, seeming to cleanse the air a little.

Tea and incense were the only gifts available this year from the Princesses' Fund, which ladies of rank were distributing to-night, principally among the sick. Such gifts were rare enough, and welcome. But ordinarily there were other things—dolls made of wool and horsehair by the princesses, little pieces of fine embroidery, knives bought at the markets from Turks. . . . To lessen in some measure

the little sick girl's disappointment at receiving no personal gift, such as a doll, Cedar-chab was plying her with riddles.

"Thirty poles in a ditch."

"Teeth?"

"That's right—aren't you smart, though! . . . Half a copeck on a cushion, a patch on a sheepskin?"

"The moon!" both the sick girl and one of her brothers cried all at once.

"You keep still," the mother said to the little boy, "you aren't sick."

"I don't want to be sick, I don't want to be sick," the little girl began wailing abruptly.

"There, there," said Cedar-chab soothingly, "I'll ask you another one."

The little girl stopped crying. The grandmother smiled with difficulty, wheezing.

"The same things we did!" she said in a tone of wonder.

"The same things we talked, one time!"

She turned her face aside, coughing spasmodically.

"Now this one is a hard one," said Cedar-chab. "Four in the morning—two at mid-day—three in the evening?"

There was silence for a moment.

"I give up," the little girl said.

"Let me tell, I know that one!" cried one of the other children.

"Well?"

"A sheep and a goat and a dog and a horse—and then a sheep and a——"

Everyone burst out laughing. But none seemed to know the right answer. Even the man and his wife looked at each other blankly, with vague smiles, scratching their heads.

"Well—Subutai?" Cedar-chab said in a curiously soft whisper, as though she'd known all along he was there. He blushed furiously, smiled like an intoxicated man, and

could think of nothing to say—although he recalled the answer from childhood. “Doesn’t anyone know?” said Cedar-chab then.

The dying grandmother stirred, her fingers fluttered ; she stared at her little granddaughter, and tried to indicate with her fingers a crawl, a walk, and a limp. Finally she gasped the words, “A man !” and burst into a new fit of coughing.

“That was too hard,” the sick girl said, “ask me something more.”

“Yes—ask her the finger-times,” said one of her brothers, “she’s good at that.”

“All right,” Cedar-chab said.

The girl held up her hands.

“Seven times seven,” said Cedar-chab.

The little girl bent two fingers on each hand.

This multiplication device was an ancient one, based on the bending-down of one finger for each digit over five in a number—as, for instance, eight-times-nine would require three fingers doubled on one hand and four on the other. Then the bent fingers were counted, “four-plus-three equals seven,” and the unbent fingers were multiplied, “two-times-one equals two,” giving the answer, “seventy-two.”

The girl stared through her fingers at Cedar-chab, who said :

“Well ? Seven times seven ? ”

“Forty-two,” the little girl said at last.

“That’s wrong ! ” her brother said. “She’s not playing right—she knows the answer ! ”

“Come, baby lamb, tell the pretty lady the answer,” the girl’s mother said coaxingly, “you know the right answer—why don’t you tell the lady ? ”

The little girl trembled, as though getting ready to cry again. She said, all in one breath :

“Because if I say the right answer then the lady will go

and I don't want her to go. . . . Forty-nine ! " she ended abruptly, sticking out her tongue at her brother, who was making faces.

" But I'll come again soon," said Cedar-chab. . . .

There were a few more places to visit. Once in a while, on their way from shelter to shelter, Cedar-chab looked curiously at Subutai ; but she made only a few casual remarks. Yet Subutai had the feeling that there was something important to be said between them, and his heart beat fast, looking at her from the corner of his eye.

Here and there among the hoshuns, the more well-to-do were having meats broiled for the feasting that would follow the midnight entry of the New Year ; on a smaller scale than at Ubasha's, the same preparations were going on, people were milling around the fires with mounting excitement.

When Cedar-chab had completed her visits, she looked at the crowds of people all about and clutched Subutai's sleeve.

" Take me somewhere," she said quietly, " we must talk a little."

This command was so abrupt that Subutai, blushing and confused, looked at her blankly.

" Don't look at me like such a ninny," she said, " am I so ugly you want to go off and leave me alone ? . . . Come, there's not much time till midnight. I declare—I think you must prefer other company to mine ! "

Subutai managed to say :

" But how can I answer—you beat me with words, like sticks—you don't let me answer properly with things that are true——"

For a moment she lowered her eyes. But then she bit her red lips, and said :

" Look you, Subutai. Where is your grandmother's hoshun ? "

" She's dead."

"I know," Cedar-chab said gently, laying her mittened hand on his. "But perhaps you might take me there—so that I might leave her a gift, a butter lotus?"

Subutai could find no proper words, merely they turned and rode side by side among the fires and excitement of Chagan-Sara Eve. And as they rode Subutai kept thinking. What could it be? What could Cedar-chab wish to say at his grandmother's tomb? Finally they came to the dark and deserted carts, the howling dogs, the broken cairn of snow. . . .

Subutai leaped down from his horse.

"Hello, what's this!" he cried sharply. ". . . Tenek?"

There was a movement among the sheep, bleating sadly, milling in the dark like a churning mass of snow. Tenek, whose feet protruded a little from the crushed dome of the cairn, was stiff and cold. Subutai tugged at his feet until the hunch-back's corpse lay with only the head and arms dangling limply into the dark hole.

"He's dead—shot in the back," said Subutai, in a wondering whisper.

Cedar-chab was at his side, cowering close to him in the dark.

"Down!" Subutai said to the dogs who were trying to lick his hands. One of them ran off a little, toward the sheep, and then looked back. Subutai frowned, trying to think what to do. The dog barked and ran forward a few more steps, scattering the sheep, looking back again. Now Subutai turned, closely attentive to the dog and the sheep. It was difficult to see—was there someone among the sheep? He moved after the dog, followed by Cedar-chab, saying with soft encouragement to the dog, "Good fellow! good boy—what is it?"

Among the sheep, Gedesu turned this way and that in panic. Had the demons spilled out of Tenek's hump, were they coming to get him? "I didn't want to! really, I

didn't want to shoot ! " he sobbed, struggling to run in the dark among the sheep. But the sheep rushed madly, striking his legs, making him stumble and fall.

" Come out ! " Subutai called now. " Come here ! "

Gedesu, floundering hysterically among the sheep, heard his brother's voice. Surely it was Subutai—surely Subutai would keep the demons from seizing his legs, from choking his throat, from murdering him in the dark ! Gedesu rose and groped his way in blind haste toward Subutai, flinging himself, abject and pathetic in his misfit armour, at his brother's feet.

" Save me ! " he cried hysterically. " I didn't mean it, I don't know why—I'm so unhappy, brother, nothing is good—everyone laughed, it was Vasilov too, even children mock me like sheep—take my sheep, dear brother Subutai, take all ! do as you like with me—only save me, brother, save me——"

" Stop your blubbering," said Subutai quietly. " Get up."

Gedesu struggled to his feet, his whole fat body trembling violently. He seized Subutai's hands and burst out again, saying :

" Take all, no man of killing am I, rather will I walk barefoot in poverty, a monk begging with a bowl. . . . You remember, Subutai,—say you remember, surely I wanted to be a priest ! To cheat, to steal, to kill—how could I come to do such things ? Take all, Subutai my brother—let me amend my life, let me become only a monk——"

But ironically, Subutai, who had been so deeply affected by Gedesu's hypocritical grief when Grandma died, listened with a contemptuous scowl to this present outburst which was, actually, much more sincere. . . . Probably Gedesu, safe again in his yurt, counting on his rosary all the sheep and good things of wealth accrued to his life, would have denied his renunciation. Yet perhaps, too, here was a

moment decisive for such a man as Gedesu. The whole structure of his life, glitter though it might through the tabulating beads of a rosary, was nevertheless empty as shadow. Such a man, in his own way, longs for the warm solid substance of compassion—like the worm, who burrows greedily for the tender earth yet lives only in empty corridors, through whose lonely body the earth, the sweet rich earth, only passes like golden sunlight through the hollow trunk of a tree. Perhaps, had Subutai taken Gedesu at his word, the greed of the man might have been tempered, or transformed a bit to compassion, had Subutai said a kindly thing or uttered a forgiving word. . . .

Finally Gedesu ceased blubbering, feeling there were no longer demons or dangers to fear, and he began peering around from under the visor of Beran's helmet, which was twisted grotesquely on his head.

From the near-by hoshuns came sounds of festival laughter and songs ; and beyond, far as all space and time, it seemed, the night lay in a lonely white realm of peace, serene and empty under the stars.

Cedar-chab stood, aloof in her furs, the red ribbons of her cap fluttering in an occasional breeze, gazing with impersonal curiosity at Gedesu. And Subutai, with no sign of compassion, was staring at his brother with a cold and indifferent contempt.

Gedesu drew himself up, trying to adjust his ridiculous armour, already detesting himself for his baseless fears and his mad gesture of renunciation. . . .

Subutai said, at last, in a toneless voice :

"Go you, Gedesu—take your animals and your wife, and go from the aimak of Temuru our father—else I kill you. Go where you like. But for such a man as you, there is no place in the ulus of Ubasha Khan."

Gedesu raised his head, and his chest began to puff with anger at such words. But when he saw the cold and intent eyes of Subutai, his glance wavered and without a word he

began to retreat. Feeling uneasily that his back was exposed to Subutai, he quickened his step, until he gained the protection of a shadowy bank of snow. And then, safe at last, he snorted with outraged dignity, muttering angrily all the way home. . . .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



When Gedesu had gone, still Subutai and Cedar-chab hesitated a while to face one another, as though they had nothing to say. Their horses nuzzled in the dark, waiting near the carts, whinnying now and then with vaporous breath white as snow. Cedar-chab toyed with the ribbons of her cap and said, vaguely looking where Gedesu had been :

“ You oughtn’t have said that—perhaps he might really go——”

“ Let him go, then,” Subutai said harshly. “ Thief, killer, coward——”

Now Cedar-chab turned and laid her hand quietly on his arm.

“ But Subutai,” she said gently, “ he’s your own brother.”

“ Yes—as you were my sister, once,” Subutai said angrily, shoving her hand away roughly. “ Ah god,” he said miserably then, “ why do you torment me so ? ”

Her lower lip trembled, she looked down.

“ I meant not to anger you,” she said faintly.

He looked down too.

“ From the beginning, it was always so,” he faltered, “ always I dream of you, yet it were better——”

She stood very still.

“ Better what ? ”

“ Better if you were gone, too,” he said unhappily.

Her hand flew to her quivering mouth.

"Wait, not that," he said desperately, "but you make me wild and hopeless—for you I'd kill, or thief—"

Now for the first time she smiled, tremulously, and she touched his arm again.

"Poor Subutai," she whispered, "yet I love him. . . ."

He spun around, seizing her mittened hand.

"Who?"

"A man who could never thief—nor kill, unless in battle," she said mysteriously, "one I have known a long time as brother—"

Subutai opened his mouth several times, looking stunned.

"You mean," he stammered, "you mean—"

She nodded, and they stared at each other.

"But that night," he said, "you didn't say—that night on the Saratov Road, you said—"

"In the morning I knew," she said, fingering the buttons of his coat with her free hand. "In the morning, when we started over the snow—I saw you a long way off—"

"Then you saw me?" Subutai said, as though this were something incredible.

"And then that night," she said, toying with his belt, "you came rousing the whole hoshun, hunting for me. . . . What a commotion—you even woke Loosang! . . . Do you know where I was, that night?"

"Ah!" said Subutai, breathing fast and remembering, his heart pounding furiously to recall his torment.

"I was looking on the sentry line," she said, "for you."

"But," said Subutai, bewildered, "but Norbo said it was only for someone to take a message, to Zebek—"

"That was a trick," she said, looking up suddenly and smiling again. "Do you think, could I tell all the same thing?"

"No, but—"

"And the day you came home from Koulagina, my heart nearly burst—yet you gave me scarcely a glance—"

"Ah, that day, yes," Subutai muttered, "that day Zebek was holding your arm."

"Zebek," whispered Cedar-chab, suddenly shivering. "Listen, Subutai—you were at his ulus. Has he many animals now?"

"Three thousand sheep. Your brother asked me to learn."

"... And what did Ubasha say?"

"'Good!'"

"Ah! Then he plans to ask much kalim!"

"But Cedar-chab," Subutai said, clinging to her hand, "even if Zebek could pay——"

"Rather I'd run away, Subutai, somewhere with you!"

"Do you remember, Cedar-chab," Subutai said, suddenly smiling, "the time we hid in the cave?"

She smiled, too.

"Yes—and they looked for us half the night! Your father found us, isn't it so?"

"How he scolded!"

"Perhaps we knew, Subutai, even then!"

Suddenly, from all the hoshuns surrounding the dark cairn where they stood, a wild tumult burst out. Gongs, bells, cymbals, shell trumpets, horns, all filled the midnight air with a discordant, exciting clamour.

"Chagan-Sara!" cried Subutai.

His eyes gleamed in the dark.

The vast mid-winter sky and steppe, the wild cymbals and horns, the excited shouts and the cries of startled beasts, the nearness of Cedar-chab, so that in spite of the cold and furs he could smell her musty sweetness—these things intoxicated Subutai.

He dropped her hand and crushed her savagely against his chest. For a moment their eyes met, gleaming, frightened but excited by what they saw in the depths of their gaze. Then her eyes turned up toward the far stars, her lids fluttered and closed.

A gust of wind shook the red ribbons of her fur cap against their cheeks.

"Ah god, Cedar-chab!" he muttered. "Now I have broken all our laws but one."

She stirred, slowly her eyes came open.

"Even that," she faltered, "for I am yours, do as you will——"

He stared desperately into her eyes.

"I am only a poor soldier," he said, "not fit to touch the toe of your little red boot——"

"Yet you touch my lips, my breasts," she whispered, "they are yours——"

"There is a price for each law. God so wills."

She stared at him more calmly.

"Are you afraid?"

"Never, Cedar-chab!" he cried. "Not for myself—gladly would I pay my life!"

"Then what?"

"Only for you," he said, unhappily. "Perhaps I have already brought you harm."

Suddenly she trembled against his chest.

"I fear, too," she said faintly, "it was evil of me——"

"No, it was I!"

"But Subutai——"

"Yes?"

"Never forsake me, never let me go——"

"Never, no matter what comes, I swear!"

"This I swear, too, Subutai," said Cedar-chab.

The wind, blowing from the hoshun squares, brought the odour of cooking meats and the sound of merriment. Near the broken cairn, Subutai and Cedar-chab lingered a moment more, uncertainly. . . . From somewhere near-by, suddenly, from somewhere beyond a wall of snow, came a muffled sound of hooves.

"Now we must go," Subutai whispered,— "we must return to your father's yurt."

He frowned, reluctant to free Cedar-chab from his arms, trying to express in words the despair and desire, the strange confusion that he felt.

"And yet," he muttered, "yet some day, Cedar-chab——"

"Ah yes," she whispered questioning, "somehow, O Subutai. . . ."

There was a sweet melancholy about her last word—like, in the carols which children all through the hoshuns were singing, under a tinkle of little bells swinging from their green dresses as they went here and there in groups, swaying, singing, raising and stamping their feet as they swayed, there was the same sweet and questioning melancholy of their carols rising to the starlit but silent sky.

Cymbals and gongs were still filling the midnight air with wild clamour, people were thronging the hoshun clearings and corridors, laughing and shouting. Among them, though, there was this same undertone of sadness, of doubt, of not knowing where they might go or what might come. Yet to-night, here on the Aral plain, there were fires blazing luxuriously ; there were steaming, sizzling meats for all. And from one yurt to another the people went, calling on one another, according to the custom of the festival.

The children, singing their carols, went about carrying clay bowls filled with boiled snow ; floating in the bowls were balls of honey and flour, and there were long silver needles with which people tried to spear the bobbing delicacies. The housewives, too, carried pots of buttered tea from yurt to yurt, and large gilt plates piled high with tsamba-cakes. Men carried jugs of arrack, offering drinks to all.

Inside the yurts, cedar and aromatic leaves were burnt.

In one of the hoshun squares, where a great fire blazed in the clearing, a clown was tumbling about and dancing, to the great delight of a crowd of shouting, stamping,

applauding adults and children. The clown was dressed, according to the tradition of Chagan-Sara, in ballooning white pantaloons, a green smock with a yellow girdle ; and he wore a black mask with a long flowing white beard. Symbolizing the joy of the occasion, yet with a melancholy touch, suggesting the passage of time, the clown capered and tumbled about in the crowd.

At the yurt of the khan, dancing had already begun.

The rich Turkey rugs had been taken from the centre of the floor and placed along the walls, where people sat. On the flooring of powdered manure and sand, which only princes and rich people could afford, Sand-chab and a younger brother of the Lama Loosang were dancing. Musicians sat near the door, cross-legged on the floor, playing their flutes, their two-stringed lutes, their drums.

The women, wives and daughters and mothers of saissangs and princes invited to Ubasha's yurt, were seated along the left wall, smiling, clapping their hands in time to the music, bobbing their heads as they watched Sand-chab advance and retreat in the dance, her eyes downcast and a secretive smile hovering about her rouged lips.

Opposite the door, there was a connecting passage-way between this yurt and the next ; and against the far wall of the second yurt, which was crowded with visitors and servants, could be seen the khan's family altar where, among the lamps and incense steadily burning, people left small offerings of coins and images carved from butter, tallow, and in some instances ice. Both these yurts, which were open to the khan's guests to-night, were brightly lighted by many tallow lamps, their vari-coloured wicks burning in silver bowls fastened to brackets along the walls.

In the main yurt, the men were seated along the right wall. The khan sat in the centre, smiling pleasantly at all, while serving women passed and refilled cups of warm liquor. The Lama Loosang sat next to Ubasha, watching Sand-chab and his young brother Bambar. Zebek was near-by,

propping his chin with his hand, looking on with a weary smile. On the right side of the khan, too, sat Chereng and other princes, including Erranpal, Ubasha's father-in-law. Choktu and the old Prince Bambar, however, were seated to the left of the khan, among the saissangs, where the old warriors, Temuru and Momotubash, were heartily recalling and toasting old victories and fallen heroes. . . .

Once, Momotubash turned for a moment to watch young Bambar, whose face reddened when Sand-chab, retreating in the dance, twisted her body beneath the red gown. Then Momotubash called, with coarse soldier humour :

"Watch your step there, young Bambar—keep your eyes on your feet, man !"

Across the yurt, some of the ladies tittered modestly. They were all clad in their best clothes, colourful gowns puffed out at the shoulders, wearing massive three-cornered earrings, glittering buckles in their plaited hair, coral and glass beads around their necks, bracelets on their arms, red lacquer on their finger-nails. . . . Somewhat self-conscious in all their finery, the ladies were gossiping in whispers.

"How she dances, that one !"

"No shame at all !"

"I think," one whispered hoarsely, "she has nothing beneath her gown. . . ."

"She may well not," said another, cattishly, "she's been worn down by many lovers, they say !"

"What a pity, really, I pity her—see, how old she seems !"

Sitting among the women, sipping arrack daintily, Mandere nodded and beamed happily. How wonderful, she thought, that she, the daughter of a petty Khoshote chief, should be sitting here, wife of the Torgut khan ! And she thought, too, of her children, and the one yet unborn, stirring uneasily in her belly—feeling, then, a twinge of worry about the newcoming Year of the Tiger, the renewed migration, wondering where the way led, over

what strange mountains and fearful plains, to what far goal. . . . Yet the arrack was pleasant, and the whispered gossip of the ladies had a safe and familiar sound. She looked up, for some new people were entering the yurt. Mandere was short-sighted, she had to wrinkle the skin of her round forehead in a little frown, to squint, in order to see. Why, it was Cedar-chab and the tall smiling Subutai—and how happy they seemed ! She said, thinking aloud :

“What a nice couple they make !”

One of the ladies pricked up her ears.

“What’s that you say—something about Cedar-chab ?”

“Why, it’s only Subutai,” said another.

Mandere blushed.

“I mean Bambar and Sand-chab,” she faltered, “what a pretty pair, dancing, so graceful !”

“She can’t fool me,” hissed one of the ladies, “she meant Cedar-chab all right !”

They whispered excitedly.

“But surely, you don’t think that the khan——”

“No, I hear she’s all but promised to Zebek.”

“Yes, that’s so, it’s a matter of kalim.”

“Personally, I’d choose Subutai—how tall, how strong !”

“Yes, but he’s poor as poor——”

“No matter, love finds a way,” someone simpered, “isn’t it so ?”

“Yes—if ever I saw a guilty pair,” hissed the first lady, “look at them ! there’s something between them, take my word !”

Such an idea, as a matter of fact, seemed to strike everyone !”

Necks were turned, for a moment all looked towards the door ; the dancers paused, even the musicians seemed to miss a beat. The flute-player, who had been keeping his lips glued to his instrument just as his eyes seemed glued to Sand-chab’s hips, now, as though some connection

of thought had been broken, raised his eyes to peer at Cedar-chab and at the same moment raised his lips from the flute. The drum-player, who had been smiling fatuously in every direction, turned to his companion and muttered. The flute-player, curiously embarrassed, as though in glancing at Cedar-chab he had been guilty of some indelicate idea, spat to one side—rather officiously, so that he might appear to have lowered his flute only to wet his lips ; and fastening his gaze intently on Sand-chab's hips once more, as though further to emphasize his complete morality he began playing more plaintively than before. The dancers began moving again, as though they had never paused ; people resumed their former positions, their talk, drinking and watching the dancers again.

Here and there, however, a few still glanced meaningfully at Ubasha, at Zebek, who lowered his eyes to scowl at the floor, and at the newcomers making their way toward the khan. . . .

"And why do you come so late ?" said Ubasha, pleasantly enough. "Where have you been ?"

"To his grandmother's tomb," said Cedar-chab, glad that the cold night air had so coloured her face that her blush mightn't be seen, "to take her a small gift, a lotus of butter."

"Ah, poor woman," Ubasha said softly, "it was thoughtful of you, sister. And many thanks, young warrior, for bringing our Cedar-chab safely home."

Cedar-chab crossed the yurt, to where Mandere and the ladies sat ; and Subutai made his way to the next yurt, where the younger men, the lesser guests, and the servants were gathered, where he was immediately besieged by people.

"Here's Subutai !"

"What—hasn't he drunk to the Chagan-Sara, yet ?"

"Off with your coat, man—here's food and drink, and dancing !"

And the young sons of visitors in the khan's yurt surrounded Subutai, shouting :

" Show us how to shoot, Subutai—show us how you speared the Kirghiz ! "

And there were people taking his coat, laughing, slapping him on the back, offering arrack and meat, dancing and smiling all about, in contrast to the cold and suspicious stares that had met him in the khan's yurt. Subutai's eyes misted happily. He drank, danced, tossed children high in the air and caught them again, laughed, and slapped men exuberantly on the back, himself.

Great platters of meat, cut from sizzling carcasses outside, were carried through here to the khan's yurt. The carriers of the silver platters laughed good-naturedly when the people, here and there, seized fragments of steaming meat as they passed.

" More where it comes from ! " the bearers cried. " All get served, in time—make way ! "

And balls of coloured felt were tossed, from person to person, like some hilarious game, for each to wipe his greasy fingers upon.

Tall jugs of arrack were brought in, too ; it seemed that the khan's bounty would never end.

And now the khan, in the next yurt, got to his feet to drink a toast to the New Year and, perhaps, to say a few words about where they went. . . .

Outside, bitterly hearing the music and noise within, Ghashun shivered and lurked unhappily in the dark. The merriment, even the fragrant odours of meat, nauseated her. Now that she had come this far, to the dark elbow formed between the two main yurts and the sleeping chamber of the khan, Ghashun seemed unable to move.

In her yurt, after Gedesu had marched off to murder Tenek the hump-back, she had lain for a time on the floor. All the time she had been thinking, What had come over her, what was wrong ? She thought of Subutai's

friend, the Cossack Vasilov, the shame and the laughter ; and she thought of to-night, certain words about Subutai, how she had taken the gun to Gedesu. Surely it was all Subutai's fault—he disliked her, he wished her harm ! she thought. After a while she got to her feet. She put more argols on the fire, she stood listening to the shouts welcoming Chagan-Sara, outside. She scowled ; but when she heard a noise near the door of the yurt, she smiled. Surely it was Subutai, coming to pay his holiday respects ! She thought of what she would say, how she would look, how Subutai would see she was a truer woman than Cedar-chab. But the steps passed by. And it was Gedesu, finally, who entered the yurt.

He cringed and blustered, all at once, telling what had occurred.

She stared at him blankly, not hearing his angry remarks about whether Subutai could order them out of the ulus or not ; all she heard, it seemed, was the name of Cedar-chab ; her face twitched with jealousy.

" But then he wasn't alone ! " was all she could say, stupidly.

" Eh ! you'd think she was the wife of Subutai, not mine ! " Gedesu said angrily, addressing the argol fire, tugging at his chain-mail. " Here, help get this off ! "

Silently, moving like a sleep-walker, Ghashun got into her heavy coat and started to leave the yurt. Gedesu, struggling with the chain-mail tangled all about his arms and head, was still shouting about all sorts of things—Subutai, the ulus, Lev Zolotsky—a jumble of things that had no meaning. Ghashun had one thought in her mind, like a demon now, and it drove her out of the yurt.

She took a horse and rode, avoiding people, keeping in the shadow of snow-banks, her heart beating wildly against the drum of her ribs. When she came near the carts, the clearing where Grandma's tomb gleamed whitely in the night, she rode softly.

Then she saw them, Subutai and Cedar-chab, and they were embraced.

Her body sagged, and she leaned down, pressing her forehead against the cold snow wall of a corridor, feeling sick. She sat thus, until they mounted their horses. And then, spurred by a demon of thought, she followed them at a distance all the way to the yurt of the khan.

Here, avoiding the glare of the great crackling fires, she rode to the dark side of the yurts. She dismounted from her horse, and stood motionlessly in the cold, listening to the music and laughter within.

Here she stood for a long time, unable to move.

But it seemed, as she stood there, that the whole shape of her life unrolled like a map—the pain, the ruin of dreams and beauty and happiness, the long hard travel from the Volga with all its losses and troubles, the empty and nauseous present; and even the future, hard travel again, despair, disaster, death—and it seemed, then, as though all this were the ill-work of Subutai. In that moment she lost all pride, all shame, like a woman so lost that nothing could stay her, now. Like a naked woman, cold and lonely she felt, fearsome as life stripped of all glitter and tinsel, like the deathly skeleton of the yew year seen through the pretty tatters of Chagan-Sara. . . .

In such guise, now, moving with deathly passion, Ghashun passed around the yurt to the door, pushing her way blindly through guards and people, a frightening apparition, straight to the place of the khan. Ubasha, holding a small bowl of arrack, had just this moment been speaking.

“Now ends the Year of the Hare, and the Year of the Tiger beings,” he was saying. “When the feasting is done, with the will of God, going in peace——”

The abrupt entrance of Ghashun, like a sudden rush of cold wind, like a portent of destruction, caused the khan’s hand to tremble violently, spilling some of the liquor from the silver bowl.

All gazed in horror at Ghashun, come like death among them.

After what seemed an eternity she fell to her knees.

"O khan, noble lord," she said at last.

The tension among the people eased, they stirred. Angrily now, all felt it was only a woman who had come among them, of all times, merely to complain about something and spoil the pleasure of Chagan-Sara. Somebody moved, trying to draw Ghashun away. But the khan said :

"No, let her speak."

And people changed their opinion again, murmuring in approbation of the khan's kindness, now feeling that Chagan-Sara was exactly the proper time, amidst all the bounty and merriment, to listen magnanimously to some poor woman's complaint.

"O khan, noble lord," Ghashun repeated, in a high sing-song voice, "our travel we bore with hardship. The wheel on one of our carts was broken, it draws with difficulty. On the cold ground we slept. Many animals we lost, many animals we have had to slaughter."

"Yet all these things," said Ubasha, quietly, "our whole people suffer."

"Yet more !" cried Ghashun. "My husband has lost an eye, a finger, a slave——"

"These things happen," said Ubasha, sympathetically, "these are bad. But all things happen."

She seized one of his hands, covering it with tears.

"But all this," she cried, "all this is the work of one man who wills us evil——"

People leaned forward now, interested. Even those in the next yurt became quiet, crowding forward in the passage-way, trying to hear, asking :

"What's up ?"

"It's Gedesu's wife."

"No ! can it be ?"

"Sure—just listen to that whine. You couldn't mistake——"

"Subutai ! your brother's old lady !"

"Sh ! be quiet—what's she talking about ?"

Ghashun had begun again, in a more fanatical voice.

"Such a man, lord, is Subutai !" she cried. "My husband Gedesu is a far-sighted man—his eye, Subutai tears out. Gedesu is a hard-working man—his finger Subutai takes. My virtue belongs to my husband Gedesu—yet this, too, Subutai had his Cossack friend, our slave Vasilov, steal in the night ! . . . Can such things be, O khan, such evil things ? And all because he covets me, lord—Ghashun, a virtuous woman, his brother's wife——"

Temuru, speechless with rage, tried to leap to his feet. His face was purple, his hands groped murderously. But his old friend Momotubash held him back.

Ubasha and the others, however, began to smile a little, shaking their heads. Surely it was a poor demented woman, saying such things ! The khan, trying to remain kindly, said :

"But surely you see, good woman, these are personal matters. If you wish to bring them to court, this is neither the proper time nor place."

Ghashun looked up, she looked all around the circle of unbelieving faces, her lips twisted bitterly.

"I want no court," she cried, "only belief !"

There was a polite silence, during which someone tried once more to draw her away, but Ghashun struggled to her feet.

"Wait," she shouted frantically, "wait ! that's not all ! Now he tried to drive us from his father's aimak—from your own ulus, O khan !"

This caused a slight stir. Even Zebek, who had appeared bored all evening, looked up with a sharp interest. The khan said firmly :

"For this, he has no authority."

But Temuru said, in a thick voice :

"Yes, get out—the both of you, Gedesu and yourself ! You're none of mine, you hear me !"

"Think you I came here," cried Ghashun, springing wildly around, "think you, it was to find such words I came ?"

The poor woman swayed, as though drunkenly, she glared blindly all about, like a beast in a cage. The people sat smiling with empty pity and disbelief. Surely there was a word, a way to make them realize ! Even Ubasha seemed impatient, annoyed. Like a woman possessed, hopelessly, trembling and livid with shame, Ghashun now turned and glared straight into the eyes of the khan.

"Think you—none of this man's evil is on your own house ?" she cried, her words coming in jerks. "Fool—shame ! Less than an hour ago your sister Cedar-chab bewitched him, stole him from me, do you hear ! on the ground, in his grandmother's tomb—rolling about like beasts——"

She couldn't go on. People gasped, there was a dreadful silence.

So enormous was her offence, so fantastic her charge, that those who might have believed a little gossip about Subutai and Cedar-chab now believed nothing at all.

All looked at the khan, in silence. At last he spoke.

"Now you may go," he said, his voice trembling with anger. "Go from my ulus."

Subutai, caught among the people packed in the passage between the yurts, tried to move ; but Bagha the Shaman, standing close, nudged him in the ribs.

"Nobody believes her," he said, chuckling, "what did I tell you ? Nobody believes her lies."

Subutai laughed brittlely.

But Ghashun, having retreated a few paces from the khan, turned again. People were about to seize her, to

force her out of the yurt. But when she turned, none touched her.

For once again, as when she had entered with so strange an effect, inexplicably, she seemed something other than herself.

In a strange distant voice she said :

“On your house, evil—on your people, evil. None believe, but I have seen it. On the morrow of the new year, cold and hunger and thirst and heat are on your people—death—these things are upon your people——”

For a moment she stood there motionlessly, her eyes closed, like a person transformed, fearsome as the image of death itself, she stood.

So she seemed, somehow for a moment, standing in the midst of the people. Then the curious illusion fell away, and she was merely a wretched woman, torn by jealousy and madness, standing there. She looked all about, like one waking in a strange place, shivered, turned again, and fled.

She was gone, like a wind that has brushed chilling in sleep, forgotten. None spoke of her. But people stirred about ; meats and drinks were brought. People talked, laughed. Soon all was as it had been before she came.

Now Ubasha stood again, raising the silver basin which he had set aside. His arm trembled a little, but he smiled slowly and his hand became firm.

“On the morrow, and all days of the year,” he said, “we go in peace.”

“God’s will,” said Loosang, bowing his head.

The people stamped and applauded vigorously.

Bagha stood to one side of the people, with a melancholy smile.

“As I foretold,” he said, “none believe her—not even when, at the very last, she speaks the truth.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The morning of February 2, 1771, broke over the Aral Plain with a dawn staining the snow like blood. . . .

All through the preceding day, the feasting and laughter of Chagan-Sara had lasted. People slept wherever they were, snoring, leaning against walls, leaning against one another, only to wake again and rejoin the drinkers, the singers, the dancers, the story-tellers, the eaters. Musicians were replaced by others ; in the temples new people came and went, and even the priests, feasted and rested, returned to the temple yurts and relieved one another, chanting with fresh vigour, splendid in their scarlet and golden robes.

Nobody could remember a Chagan-Sara of such endless bounty—when even the dogs, for the first time one could recall, were sleeping fat and replete. Yet in the midst of such feasting, all knew that this was an unnatural plenty, derived from the slaughter of half their animals. Who knew what would come, on the morrow ? All feasted and laughed unnaturally, persistently, as though they could never get enough, as though, perhaps, for the last time such plenty might be.

But the festival had ended abruptly when horns and gongs sounded the second midnight. Laughter and music ceased, and the yurts and hoshun squares lost their festal air. The fires no longer sizzled with savoury meats, rather the flames crackled with things being destroyed.

People, following the example of Ubasha with his fine

Chinese pots, were throwing on to the flames all those odds-and-ends of broken chests, worn-out saddles and cordage and mats which they had thought somehow to mend, earthen pots and platters which chipped and broke in travel, all manner of things which ought to have been destroyed before leaving the Volga. Many, too, who had managed to bring the poles and frames of their yurts thus far, now seeing their carts and animals over-laden with new leathers and felts and with huge quantities of dried meats—many of these people abandoned their bulky frames and poles at last.

From midnight on, carts had been packed and prepared for travel again. Animals were segregated. Dogs barked, people ran shouting among the herds and flocks, separating their goats, sheep, cattle, oxen, donkeys. There was a terrific bellowing and bleating; all seemed in wild disorder. Camels twitched their shaggy sides, little bells tinkled on the pack-animals of the rich, chests and bales and cordage lay all about in confusion. As the cold twilight before dawn came, children began to cry, animals became restless, making irritable sounds, dogs barked, men shouted. . . . Yet just before dawn, the whole horde reached the order of migration again.

Now morning had come.

The brass cannons hurled iron balls at the rising sun, the stain of dawn died in a whiter light, the sun changed from deep red to a pale yellow disc as it slowly rose over the glittering snow. The lamas doffed their scarlet mitres, offering their ancient morning mantras, chanting in shrill and somewhat hysterical tones :

“It has arisen, the sun of happiness has arisen ! Om Maricīnam Svaha—bless us and fulfil our desires ! Protect us, O Goddess, from all the eight fears—of foes, robbers, wild beasts, snakes and poisons, weapons, fire, water, and high precipices——”

And the coming of day, like the shuddering breath of

dawn, touched and stirred all the people and animals, waiting on the plain. The lamas, at the last sound of the cymbals and gongs, the last sonorous noise of the trumpets, replaced their scarlet hats. The horde shuddered, wheels creaked, they finally moved; and the great migration, after the long halt here in the south-eastern corner of Europe, was at last resumed.

Beyond the Mugadir Hills, which could already be seen darkly against the dawn, lay Asia.

"God's will," said Loosang.

Cart-wheels sank a little in the crust of the snow, leaving long shiny ruts behind. The hooves of beasts scarcely marked the crystal surface on which they trod. The sun rose in a sky of winter blue. The white plain stretched cold and serene as far as the eye could see, except where in the east the hills now loomed more solidly. People, particularly women and children, smeared their faces with rouge to lessen the glare of sun and snow. Now that they were moving again, it seemed they had never paused—yet all were rested, even the old and ill seemed to have new vigour. The day was cold, but there was little wind. The weather was ideal for travel, the bright world all about was empty and harmless.

Or so it seemed.

Yet the warriors under Prince Bambar in the rear, chatting idly as they rode, occasionally stooping to retrieve some trinket—a bit of ribbon from a lady's hair, a little bell from an animal of the rich—turned and carefully scanned the western horizon from time to time.

Nothing unusual was seen, behind—nothing but a few fires still smouldering under the cold sky and a host of black crows, buzzards, and vultures, soaring over the remains of fire and tomb, their black wings lazily flapping. . . .

And forty miles ahead, too, the vanguard riding over the unmarked snow kept a constant watch. But all seemed well; and as the sun rose toward its winter meridian,

soldiers here and there began to sing, cheerful to be living and moving again, enjoying the cold clear day. As the afternoon came on, now and then someone glanced ahead at the hills—but nothing moved, there were no signs of life, only a flock of black crows from time to time.

When the sun began to decline, shadows began to take shape blackly among the cleft rocks of the hills ahead, deep shadows reaching among the snow-covered rocks and trees. But to the Torguts the Mugadir Hills, part of the Ural divide, seemed a refuge, a bulwark against Russian attack—a wall between two worlds, in the more ancient of which they now placed all their hopes. Thus their approach to the darkening hills was eager; songs continued, a subdued excitement pervaded the long Torgut columns when the Mugadir loomed directly ahead.

The vanguard of warriors, spurring their horses, started to gallop up the long slope of the pass.

A musket shot rang out.

Instantly all stopped; silence, a terrible stillness ensued.

Whence came the shot—who fired?

The long wall of the Mugadir was still, as before.

To the north was Darik Tagh, crest of the hills, its fifteen hundred feet heavy with snow. The perpendicular walls of the hills, sheer granite to which no snow could cling, glistened peacefully in the late afternoon sunlight. Here and there, clefts in the rocken hills could be seen, deep with snow, dark-shadowed. The pass lay between Janan and Jaksi Tagh, a little to the south of Darik Tagh. Between these two peaks, a dark defile reached over the rising ground, which was traversible for carts and pack animals at this one point.

All the clefts, the shadows, the granite hills were still, as before.

Slowly, the line of soldiers moved forward again, bewildered, but cautiously.

Now there were several clear shots—and one of the warriors clutched at his side.

Up the long slope, in the shadowy pass, a few puffs of smoke could be seen, rising from behind boulders covered with snow, bluish-white in the cloven gloom.

Back through the whole horde—animals, people, all halting abruptly—a chill of shock, danger, terror, travelled like a cold dark wind.

Orders rang out.

“Musketeers down! Archers behind! Lancers and swordsmen, rear!”

But there was little need for such commands—all knew the order of battle. Soldiers with muskets dropped from their horses, which were led to the rear. The musketeers flattened themselves on the cold snow of the slope, creeping slowly on their stomachs toward the pass above. Behind came the archers, clad in cow-hide breast-plates, their great bows strung with arrows two feet long, ready to shoot over the heads of the musketeers. And behind all came lancers and swordsmen, some with wicker-work shields.

The Torgut blue-and-white banner was raised.

Ubasha, Temuru, and Momotubash held a quick council.

The two old fighters were agreed.

“The pass here can be held against a frontal attack,” Temuru said. “Unless we’re willing to sacrifice many men—no matter how many the enemy, nor who they are—the advantage is theirs.”

Ubasha gnawed at his moustache.

“Yes—a vast commotion must be made directly against the pass,” said Momotubash, “so they may believe we attack directly. But in secret, we must dislodge them from flank and rear.”

“It’s so,” said Temuru.

For a moment more, Ubasha remained silent. . . . Only

last night—only a moment ago, all had seemed so peaceful ! The khan stared sadly at the treacherous pass. But hearing a rattle of musket shots again, the yells of some of his men on the slope, Ubasha's face became grim.

"So be it, then," he said, "let it be thus !"

And the great red battle flag was unfurled, revealing, like the stripping away of some mask, the terrible face of the Mongolian god of war.

The attack on the pass began.

Ubasha remained in command of the slope. Temuru galloped north with a large troop, seeking a place to cross over the hills ; he and Momotubash, who rode south, were to attack from the rear. Several smaller troops, under Choktu and Rabdan and Subutai, were to try flanking the pass from above.

Subutai looked for a path up the steep wall of Janan Tagh. He made a false start, up a deep cleft in the rock that led nowhere. He wheeled and shouted to the men, doubling back. Soon they found a precipitous gully, choked with boulders and snow, dangerous but passable. Subutai led the way, his horse scrambling sturdily up toward the ridge.

On the crest he waited for the others, looking back for the last time on Europe. People and animals stretched in long turbulent columns far as the eye could see ; the declining sun glittered goldenly. The Asian side of the hills, sloping gently to the east, was already shadowed, so that the deep drifts of snow seemed blue. For a moment Subutai waited on the crest of the divide, feeling unaccountably sad yet deeply exultant, too.

Then he saw Temuru's men coming from the north, riding fast on the Asian plains below, coming swift and silent in the blue shadow of the hills. His own men had already gained the ridge, behind him, and he gave the signal to proceed.

The crest of Janan Tagh descended toward the pass in a

series of terraces, covered with boulders and stunted trees. Occasionally a bush of ground-pine could be seen, shaggy with snow like a white porcupine, where the drifts had been hollowed away by wind. Across the pass, where the formation of Jaksi Tagh seemed much the same, some of Choktu's men appeared from behind boulders, descending the terraces.

From the pass between them, shouts and musket shots echoed vaguely ; sometimes a puff of smoke rose clearly in the still air.

Subutai and the horsemen went cautiously forward.

Someone dislodged a boulder. With a sound of shearing ice, it tore free and began to roll slowly down over the hard snow. Subutai dashed forward. But there was no staying the stone—it rolled faster, crashing through a pine bush, leaving sharp dents in the snow—toppling with a crash, finally, into the pass below.

Instantly there were shouts, much closer than before. Men were in ambush, it seemed, just under the lowest terrace of all. A few heads were cautiously raised, hands clutching the icy rock, startled eyes peering up where the boulder had come from. . . .

“Kara-Kalpaks !” one of the Torguts shouted contemptuously, dashing forward without caution. A musket barrel appeared. The Torgut horse and rider went crashing below.

Some of the others dismounted hastily, creeping behind boulders, muskets ready.

“Back ! On horse !” cried Subutai—for the Torgut horses were more sure of foot on such rock and snow than the men. “Spread !” he shouted. “Fire ! . . . Forward, slow !”

Now the Torgut muskets began.

Several of the Kara-Kalpaks were hit, they fell from the rock, and the others ducked. But suddenly a long lance whizzed through the air, barely missing Subutai. Someone

behind him caught it, as it slowed, examining the fine ash and the tassle of feathers at the end of the lance.

"Kirghiz-Kazak!" he shouted.

And now, swarming up a ledge from the pass, shouting and scrambling over the terrace, waving lances and swords, came a host of those fierce warriors, Kirghiz of the Little Horde, mortal enemies of the Torguts. They had obviously made an alliance with the large slow-going southerners, the Kara-Kalpaks from the Aral shores, to prevent the Torguts from passing through into Asia. But some of the Kirghiz seemed to think, now, that they had been betrayed by their allies—for one of them, scrambling past a clumsy Kara-Kalpak, dealt the latter such a blow that he shrieked and tumbled from sight. Shouting and bloodthirsty, like men betrayed, the Kirghiz came.

The Torgut musketeers had little time to reload. Muskets were quickly swung over shoulders again. Knives, swords, and lances were seized. There was a terrific hubbub of shouts. Not many of the Kirghiz had guns. A few had carbines, a few had old pistols with no percussion locks. One fellow, not far from Subutai, raised his weapon. He had fired it before. His face was blackened by powder smoke, he held a live coal clenched between his teeth. But this time, when he leaned forward with the coal to fire the powder, the charge burst back at him. When the smoke cleared, his face had been torn apart, and he reeled like a blind man. But most of the Kirghiz fought with lances and swords. The enemies clashed, on the white terrace, shouting and screaming, and only the sure-footed horses kept deathly still.

Subutai's lips drew back tightly from his teeth, involuntarily, so that his face seemed fixed in a smile. His heart pounded wildly, he seized a sword, shouting fiercely:

"Ya-bonnah!"

But it was a sickening feeling when his sword, bursting through a thin leather shield, encountered nothing but a

substance that seemed to cut like butter. The Kirghiz's eyes, only a moment ago locked with his own so fiercely, began to glaze. And when Subutai withdrew his sword, in spite of the din he seemed to hear a sickening sound, and blood and a few fragments of flesh were on his blade.

Ah, war was something else than fighting Beran—something other—killing was different than he had believed. . . .

But there was no time to think, to remember the Kirghiz's eyes. For Torguts, too, were being felled all about. On the opposite wall an equally fierce battle was being fought. Choktu's men had crowded rashly forward, almost to the wall of the pass, so that the combat was occurring there on a precarious sloping ledge. Many warriors, Torgut and Kirghiz both, tumbled into the shadows below.

From the rear, Temuru and Momotubash were beginning their attack, advancing up the blue slope in battle array. And from the western plain, suddenly, there came a terrific noise—and something clattered and crashed furiously in the echoing depths of the pass.

The cannon !

A great cheer went up from the Torguts. They wheeled their horses dangerously, they slashed at their foes with triumphant vigour.

A clever man, the khan—a general !

The enemy was demoralized, their ambush had turned into a trap for themselves.

The Kara-Kalpaks wanted to flee and hide. What armour they wore covered only their breasts. The Kirghiz, cursing such cowardice, speared the backs of their allies.

That all of them must die, the Kirghiz knew—but they would die like men, killing !

They swarmed up the walls of the pass, rising from places of ambush behind stones and boulders, charging with blind fury at the Torgut encirclers.

The air was filled with shouts, a clatter of steel, expiring cries.

Many Torguts were killed before the pass was captured.

Terraces, ledges, the floor of the pass itself, all were littered with dead and dying.

One huge Kirghiz warrior clung to a jutting rock. His leg hung limply, swinging a little, loosely, like a bloody pendulum. It had been slashed through at the hip. Below in the pass, a Torgut archer strung his bow. Heavily the Kirghiz hunched himself on the rock, and with his knife he cut through the last shreds of clothing and flesh. Seizing his severed leg like a war club, he dashed it down at his foe. And then, with a startling humourless laugh, with a last effort of his dying strength, he plunged his body down from the rock with his dagger aimed at the Torgut's throat.

No Kara-Kalpaks escaped, no Kirghiz remained alive.

Now up the European slope the horde began to advance.

Weapons, clothing, were stripped from the dead. The bodies were trampled into the snow.

The blue-and-white pennons of the Torgut Banner, the great standard of the Torgut war-god, blazing red as the sun now setting in the west over the fiery snow, were advanced through the Mugadir pass.

No longer coming in peace, the Torgut horde followed, shouting wildly. Carts creaked and bumped against one another drunkenly. People, with mad exuberance, clutched at bodies still caught on the walls—bodies of Kirghiz and Torguts alike—shouting fanatically whenever they succeeded in felling one like dead fruit from the stony limbs of the wall. Animals packed the pass, bellowing and trampling the snow, ploughing bodies underfoot, scarring, like a raging torrent, the very walls. Like a savage flood

the Torgut horde burst through the pass and down over the long slope, deep blue in the dusk, returning to Asia.

Thus, at the end of the Year of the Hare, the Year of the Tiger began.

BOOK TWO



The Glory of an Action is, That it be Complete.

Genghis Khan

*"Yet falling leaves will never
return to the tree on which
they grew. Nor will running
water and blowing wind
return to their source. So
will the dead never return
to their life."*

—from an ancient
Torgut proverb

CHAPTER ONE



In Asia, many winds blow, and the land is old. Probably the land over which the Torguts now travelled was formed by the first blocks of rock rising from the sea. On these plains and plateaus much of the earth has been powdered to sand, dry and unwatered, and the winds of all seasons struggle for precedence here. Of these lands the Khan Genghis once wrote, "Here the rivers have long been misused, and they fall like sighs into the dry hot earth."

The great caravan routes—known to the Greeks and Romans, and reopened during the Middle Ages by Genghis—passed through these lands. On the great roads of antiquity were dry lakes, deserts without grass, a few rivers with canal-systems of dense green fields, and occasional cities of white sand and stone in the desert, such as Khokhand and Tashkhent and Samarkhand. These were the roads between China and Babylonia and Phœnicia, and in the time of Genghis, between Mongolia and Bagdad and Europe.

Mostly the routes used lay south of the forty-fifth parallel. In the north there were few cities, and much of the land was seasonally impassable because of the vast swampy lakes and the marshes between the rivers. The moisture of western Asia seemed to concentrate in these northern lands, ironically, bringing a heavy rainfall which benefited no one. So dense were the reeds and rushes, so marshy the soil, that neither caravan nor pastoral settlers came to these northern lands.

Yet it was toward this ancient and abandoned country

in the north-east, once the mountains had been crossed, that the Torgut people travelled.

Almost from the day the Mugadir was crossed, the weather and the conditions of travel changed. Spring came early in 1771. Even in late February the snows were already melting underfoot. Great drifts of snow were encountered on the Asian slope, in which many carts and animals were lost. Later, when the melt began, travel became still more difficult and losses increased. During late February and March the land was covered with treacherous unchannelled streams like bursting arteries in the rotting snow. During the nights, a great mist rose from the snowy bogs, and the air was cold and damp. And in the day-times it often rained, cold and heavily, and opposing winds blew fiercely over the grey and watery world. . . .

From the time the Torguts crossed the Mugadir and began moving over this Asiatic land, the people no longer grumbled about slaughtering half their animals, for all realized that it would have been impossible to travel here with their original herds and flocks.

Most of the fodder carts were empty. Sheep and cattle had to live on what they could find under the snow. Even the present number of live animals seemed far too great for the forage and care required in moving through these desolate lands.

The first night across the mountains, the Torguts camped on the vast white slope. Through the blue winter dusk and night, new hoshuns continued to press forward between the high dark walls of Janan Tagh and Jaksi Tagh, travelling, as they descended, farther and farther out over the firelit plains. All night long, great torches of tallow-reed flamed in the rocky pass.

In the morning, more than half of the hoshuns still remained on the European side of the Mugadir. During the whole second day, carts and animals came into Asia, creaking, rattling, plodding, crowding the pass.

Those who had crossed the mountains during the preceding night or afternoon now slowly gave way to the newcomers. They began to spread widely over the drifted land, letting the pony herds trample the deep and uncrusted snow ahead of the herds and flocks. Animals were allowed to straggle somewhat, foraging under the packed snow for winter grasses and nourishment.

From the pass it seemed, looking down, that Asia was a whole rolling sea covered with infinitely many small dark figures scattered over its most distant reaches, even beyond the glittering horizon. And from out on the distant plain, from the foot of the slope, looking up at the rocky hills tufted with snow, the pass seemed a high and narrow corridor through which—ten carts abreast, twenty animals, thirty people abreast—The Torgut people, slowly, were escaping from darkness into a white and unpeopled world.

By the third day, all of the five thousand hoshuns of the Torgut Banner had safely crossed the Mugadir divide. The migration was resumed. But now, instead of travelling in three long broad columns as before, the Torguts proceeded in a vast concourse with no apparent order.

The hoshuns, the aimaks, it seemed, all went where they willed, in search of forage, in order to avoid drifts that were too deep—or later, when the snows began to melt, to avoid freshets and bogs of muddy snow. The troops—the vanguard and flank and rearguard companies—seemed, alone of all the horde, to maintain order and discipline.

Yet this seeming disorder—the widely scattered hoshuns, the slow and cumbrous foraging procedure of the horde—was the usual migratory order of the Torguts. Hoshuns maintained contact with aimaks, aimaks with the proper ulus. The authority of the demschis and the schulengas, of the saissangs and princes, was more marked than ever. Actually, that which was diminished—necessarily, for the time, in view of the tremendous difficulty of victualing so

vast an army of animals in this mid-winter migration—was the rigid military order which had existed before.

The barren and wind-scored land, the uncrusted and melting snow, made such martial progress impossible now. Only a few miles could be travelled each day. But with the Mugadir at their backs, there no longer seemed need for haste. What could the Tsarina, the Cossacks, the Russians under Traubenbergh, do to them now? The animals had to forage for food; drifts and bogs had to be avoided. Travel slowed still more, migration became more arduous and difficult, as the spring weather of 1771 came during early March. The horde, feeling its way over the desolate and treacherous land, lost all semblance of the swift and compact army it had formerly been.

The slow diffused movement of migrating and foraging millions took the place of a fast and battlemented march. As a result, relatively few animals were lost through insufficient pasturage or carelessness. But the penalty of such travel—no matter how necessary it might be—was the constant danger from lurking enemies.

Few, but carefully ambushed, savage bands might swoop down suddenly on outlying herds and hoshuns of the cumbrous horde. Particularly toward dusk, when animals were apt to stray far, to stumble in drifts, the soldiers had to be called upon to herd the cattle and sheep safely, to haul carts from muddy drifts. At such times, frequently, bands of savage warriors would suddenly appear in the neighbourhood of an isolated and unprotected hoshun or herd, seizing a few animals, often killing a few old men, women, and even children.

There were no large-scale attacks on the horde during this time.

But as March drew to an end, small bands of Kirghiz-Kazaks—seeming to multiply persistently as the insects that already swarmed above the misting sloughs of snow-water—continually harassed the most vulnerable borders of the

plodding horde. Little could be done in defence against such guerrilla attacks, for the Torguts were scattered over a vaster number of miles than ever before, seeking forage and safe passage. The Kirghiz-Kazaks, whenever a troop of Torguts appeared, sped away in the rain or dusk. Pursuit brought the Torguts little or no results.

Stars and sun were consulted whenever the skies cleared, and a north-easterly course was followed as nearly as possible. Some days, practically no distance at all was gained ; and in the whole two months of travel beyond the Mugadir, little more than three hundred miles of land were crossed. Yet the maintenance of their north-easterly course was reassuring to most of the people ; every step they took, no matter how slowly, was a step toward those lands of the Trugai—of which they had heard so much since leaving the Emba, and in which they all hoped to find a new home.

"Listen," they said to one another. "If we were going to Djungaria, then we'd have travelled south of Lake Chalkhar—there'd be no point in troubling ourselves with such travel as this, isn't it so ?"

Some, who still clung to the idea that the horde was really going to Djungaria, nevertheless said mysteriously :

"Wait and see. This ear has heard other things."

"What the ear hears," said others, quoting an old proverb, "is misleading. What is seen by the eye, is true."

And finally, near the end of March, when the migration headed abruptly north to avoid the shores of Lake Chalkhar, then even the sceptics had to admit that the Turgai country, truly, seemed their goal.

Sometimes, from a slight prominence of land, the dull grey water of the lake could be seen, distantly in the west. Over the distant reeds and waters, too, flocks of ducks and geese began flying, the heralds of spring. Ahead, as the banks of the Irgiz River were slowly approached, a few trees were seen with green buds ready to burst in leaf.

There were still two rivers to cross before the Turgai country would be reached. One was the Irgiz, flowing from the north-west ; and the Turgai was the other coming from the north-east. Both flowed into the great lake, forming a wild delta of marsh-land between their courses.

The Torguts, nearing the Irgiz, felt a renewal of hope, which dispelled, for a brief moment, the gloom and the weariness of their damp, leaden days of travel.

The vanguard of warriors had been riding well in advance ; and already on the bank of the Irgiz River they were busily constructing a large number of floating bridges. Strong tough reeds, often fifteen feet in length, were gathered together in great sheaves, bound, and joined by cow-hide thongs and whips. Stomach casings of slaughtered cattle were used, too, inflated and tied to rafts of reeds, for carrying the lesser loads.

For many miles along the high western bank of the small but swift-flowing Irgiz, the scene was one of great bustle and excitement, in spite of a grey rain that fell steadily through several days. As the first hoshuns and aimaks of the horde crowded toward the bank and the bridges, great shouts went up. Carts began lumbering over the reeds, animals plunged down the bank and into the stream with a terrific medley of sounds.

Often the bridges were submerged, letting the frightened draught animals sink knee-deep in the water. Women and herdsmen, shouting and cracking long whips tipped with metal thongs, rode into the muddy stream, swimming their horses alongside the reed-pontoons, keeping the oxen and pack animals from lunging into the river. Sometimes a bridge broke, and then animals and carts were frequently lost ; and the weary soldiers sped away for new rushes to repair the damage done to the bridge.

The marches between the Irgiz and the Turgai were covered with dense fields of reeds, and many wild-fowl rose screeching from these haunts as the mighty migration

approached. At times the air was so thick with their whirring wings that it seemed likely a lance, thrown casually, might easily spit a dozen birds or more. Yet nobody thought of hunting ; all thought only of escaping from the marshes of Chalkhar. For no matter which way the Torguts might turn, away from the swamps and reeds, little dry footing could be found. The whole delta land, here between the Irgiz and Turgai, was a vast green bog.

The distance between the rivers, where the Torguts crossed, was little more than thirty miles—yet it took fourteen days for the advance hoshuns to reach the west bank of the Turgai River.

On the way, a full third of all remaining animals were lost, drowned in swamps, mired in bogs. People, animals, household goods, all were covered with mud. Carts were overturned, vast quantities of dried meat were lost underfoot. And when the cart wheels sank over their axles in the marsh and mud, then the carts had to be abandoned where they stood, often with no chance of transferring their loads.

When people remembered how hard the winter travel to the Emba had seemed, now they laughed bitterly, for this was the most calamitous travel of all.

Gedesu, who had joined the ulus of Zebek-Dordzhi when the Mugadir was crossed, fared no better than others, crossing the swamps. There even came times when he cursed his accumulated wealth, for it seemed only that he had more than others to lose. In addition to his original herds and the carts he had shrewdly bargained from neighbours, he had taken better than half of Grandma's animals, leaving the balance in Yelden's care for Temuru and Subutai. Most of his carts, piled high with slaughtered meat, were without drivers, for only two victims of his bargaining had been willing to follow Gedesu into Zebek's ulus, the others thinking to claim their share of the meat later. Puffing and shouting, Gedesu tried to tend his vast wealth,

cursing at Ghashun whenever one of the carts mired itself, frantic and choking with hopeless anger, watching his wealth dwindle by half, cursing the great burden of loss that had come upon him.

Yet most of the Torguts, in spite of the steaming grey skies and the soggy marsh, ploughed heavily on toward the Turgai, aiding one another when they could, bending their backs under carts in order to free them from mud if possible, saving what sheep and cattle they could, travelling through the water and bog-lands with bitter fortitude.

A few people, in the dark wet night, spoke in whispers of the reason for such calamities as these. Some said it was a natural tragedy, trying to cross such terrible lands. Others thought it might be the result of Russian or Kirghiz witchcraft. But still others whispered that it was vengeance upon them—punishment for the lives they had taken—first the murder of Cossack hostages, and then the slaughter of enemies in the Mugadir pass.

"It comes on us, now," one would whisper in the dark night, "because we slaughtered without need."

"But then, we needed the pass!"

"Yes, but we needn't have taken so many lives—compassion is good, too."

"You're getting soft—what are you, a woman, a priest?"

"No, but the war-flag—the god of death——"

"You're wrong, it's quite simple—if you cross a marsh in the spring, losses are natural, isn't it so?"

"There's something to what you say. . . . But all the same, it's Kirghiz wizardry, nothing else."

"Then what of our own magicians?"

"Listen," whispered the first speaker, "we shouted like mighty heroes because we killed a little—it was a foolhardy challenge," he whispered hoarsely. "These are the lands of Asia, now, where our forefathers brought much death and destruction; and the land remembers. Loss and death lie in wait, do you hear?"

Some shivered, hunched in the chill spring night.

"Ah, that's all nonsense," someone said.

All nodded, without much conviction.

"First it was the Year of the Hare," said the first speaker.

"Yes, and we travelled like hares—and now it's the Year of the Tiger!" someone said boldly.

"The Year of the Tiger," whispered the first man, "Yes. . . . But who, neighbours, is the Tiger?"

All shivered now, sitting in the dark.

At last someone said :

"Whatever comes, neighbours—it's the will of God, isn't it so?"

They nodded slowly, without much conviction, cold in spite of their long coats, for the night seemed damper, more chill than before.

And each morning, when the two brass cannon fired their iron balls eastward over the smoking marsh, the lamas chanted their mantras toward a sun that never appeared, and Loosang murmured, "God's will. . . ."

The thirteenth day on the marsh-land was worst of all. More carts and animals were lost in the swamps of Lake Rinkul, a bayou of the Turgai that barred their approach to the river bank.

Here, the brass cannon were hopelessly mired and had to be left behind. Beasts panted and slipped in the mud, men grunted and groaned—but nothing would budge the gun-wheels. The cannon in which all had taken such pride, no longer shiny but covered with mud, were abandoned.

Desperately the horde ploughed forward, making a last effort to reach the Turgai.

In all this time the princes and people of rank, as well as the merely rich, fared little better than the rest of the horde. Their losses were equally great ; their discomforts, during days of plodding travel and nights that were cold and

damp, were nearly the same. It was only rarely that a mound of firm soil, clumps of debris and grass could be found sufficient to pitch a shelter-tent. Mostly such people slept, like the others, on top of their carts.

Cedar-chab made no complaint. But she had been used, not long ago, to sleeping on the ground in summer, living close to the people, sharing their experiences.

Her single comment on all the hardships and disasters that mounted each day, was that such losses and sufferings were needless. She felt that weak leadership and bad counsel were responsible for all the trouble. To her, it seemed the horde might well have summered on the Asian slope of the Mugadirs—or, if the Turgai lands had to be reached this spring, then they might have crossed the Khara Kum desert to the south of Lake Chalkhar and there turned north. These things were on a map Zebek and the Lama Loosang had drawn, which she had found in Ubasha's yurt when the Chagan-Sara feast was ended. Puzzled by such things, she thought surely someone ought to have known that the marsh-lands between the Irgiz and the Turgai were nearly impassable in the spring. Yet so conciliating had Zebek seemed lately, so unassuming, and the Lama Loosang more and more humble each day, that she could scarcely find reason to blame them directly for what had occurred. It was their bad counsel, perhaps well-meant, and Ubasha's weak and compromising leadership, she thought, which had brought the Torgut people to such a sorry point.

Then, too, she was largely preoccupied these days with attending Mandere, whose time of confinement was drawing close.

Often she rode beside the great shaggy camel whose silver bells, caked with mud, no longer tinkled ; she would look up at her sister-in-law, who, from the pannier in which she rode, leaned down with dark frightened eyes toward Cedar-chab. And Cedar-chab would try to think

what she might do, of things to say that would lessen the worry in Mandere's mind.

Such times, Mandere would often lean down with a cold hand and touch Cedar-chab's cheeks, as though it were Cedar-chab, not Mandere, who needed compassion. And when Cedar-chab felt her sister-in-law's cool hand on her own flushed cheek or brow, then sometimes she turned her head away, so that none might see the sudden tears in her eyes. . . . Yet why she should feel thus, easily moved to tears, Cedar-chab was unaware ; and she ascribed it once to compassion for Mandere, and another time to sadness for the whole Torgut horde.

It was Sand-chab, however, who surprised everyone by her lack of complaint.

The elder sister of the khan had been brought up in comparative luxury and shelter, never allowed to run and ride with the herds like Cedar-chab ; and at an early age she had been married to the rich Prince Galdan, chieftain of the Derbet ulus on the western bank of the Volga, a man who lived more in the Russian style of luxury, it was said, even than Zebek.

Sand-chab had left such wealth in order to go with her people—and with the Lama Loosang, as gossipers never failed to mention ; yet most of the way from the Volga, to the very bank of the Irgiz, she had complained unceasingly.

From the day the Irgiz was crossed, she changed. In the heart-breaking morass through which the Torguts struggled for fourteen days, it was Sand-chab rather than her younger sister who made light of their troubles, who found a good word for everybody, who helped eagerly as though with no cares of her own, who sang and amused the two small children in a pannier on the far side of Mandere's camel, who crooned them gently to sleep at night.

Sand-chab, singing softly to the children in the dusk of these misty spring nights, seemed truly happy for the first time in her life.

One day, the thirteenth day on the marsh-lands, she rode back to banter a little with the three Cossack hostages who travelled in one of her brother's carts, bound and guarded by an old warrior who always rode at their side. These three were the only ones left of the seventeen Cossacks originally captured by the horde—for twelve had been killed in the first ten days, Vasilov had escaped, and the mutilated body of Captain Dudin had finally died. Of the three, Sand-chab best liked Lieutenant Michailov, a jolly young fellow with whom she had waltzed and flirted on a recent birthday of the Tsarina when the officers of Fort Jenat and their ladies had entertained some of the west-bank Torguts. Thinking what she might say to cheer Michailov and the others, Sand-chab rode back through the mud looking for their prison-cart.

She found it bogged deep in the marsh, in a water-hole, with the floor of the cart submerged and the men nearly drowned. The old Torgut guardsman, with his mouth half open, was watching them choke. When Sand-chab ordered him to cut their bonds, he began to argue, savage-tempered because of the endless mud and rain.

"Clearly it is God's will," he said. "Let them drown."

With a grim smile she seized the knife from his belt.

"Get along, you old goat," she shouted at him, leaping into the cart, "I'll be responsible for them from now on."

When she had cut the thongs binding the Cossacks, Michailov could barely grumble his thanks—but the eyes of all three men were eloquent with gratitude.

"Come on now, wake up," Sand-chab shouted, for the pouring rain was rattling loudly all around. "You can have three of my brother's horses, if you'll promise not to escape."

Michailov, who was filthy and unkempt, bowed stiffly, standing in the mud.

"Madame Princess," he said, trying to smile, finding his voice at last, "you have our word—and our humble hearts."

An hour later, at dusk, when the Cossacks appeared on three of Ubasha's horses, they delivered to Sand-chab their prison-cart, which they had miraculously rescued from the bog—cleaned thoroughly, bedded with fresh straw, covered with felt—a sleeping-cart fit for a princess, as Michailov said, in such times as these.

Sand-chab, deeply touched, offered the cart to Mandere and her children. But Mandere smiled fondly at her sister-in-law and whispered :

"I am comfortable here, yet for a few days. Go and sleep well, and see that our little sister sleeps one night in peace, too."

That night, Cedar-chab and Sand-chab lay in the cart, listening to the rain falling steadily outside. Sand-chab told how she had found the Cossacks drowning in the bog, and how she had freed them.

"Yes," Cedar-chab said listlessly, hearing the monotonous rain in the night, "Subutai would have freed them, had he been here."

"Look," said Sand-chab, suddenly, her eyes wide open in the dark. "You're in love with this fellow Subutai, isn't it so?"

Cedar-chab nodded tearfully and her cheek groped toward her sister's hand.

After a while, Sand-chab said :

"Listen, is he so poor?"

Cedar-chab broke into tears, her whole body quivered ; and Sand-chab took her in her arms, trying to think what to say. Outside, it seemed that the rain would never cease. The chill damp of the night penetrated the cart, where the sisters lay. Then Sand-chab, unable to think of anything beyond her own experience, whispered :

"But there are ways—other ways——"

Cedar-chab's body trembled unhappily, she shook her head.

Sand-chab sighed.

"No, perhaps not," she murmured gently, "you're not the same."

She stroked Cedar-chab's hair, and after a while she said :

"But even so, something will happen—don't worry. Why, just think, Cedar-chab !" she said, ironical but tender. "Your young hero may capture Nurali himself, next. Surely the Kirghiz Khan will bring a khan's ransom, isn't it so ? Yes—anything may happen !"

"Nothing will happen," sighed Cedar-chab, inconsolably, "there's no way, nothing, there's no end——"

And outside, the cold spring rain still fell.

Throughout the horde, that thirteenth night on the marsh, it seemed to most people that there was no way out, no end, too—that the world was nothing but bog and water, grey and without hope. . . .

But in the morning, after the grey mist of dawn rose like smoke and dissolved, the sky grew suddenly clear and blue, a clean warm wind swept over the marsh, fragrant with spring ; and in the air, sparkling with sunlight, bird wings seemed no longer ominous portents but flashed, white as new feathers, floating and soaring in the joyous breeze.

And when the people started ahead—even though the marsh still clutched at the wheels of their carts and the feet of their animals—all seemed light as the air, the birds, the sun itself, buoyant as a golden bubble in a blue sea.

The waters of Lake Rinkul, to the south, were deep blue too, sparkling and rippled by the warm wind. The marsh grasses, the reeds, were fresh and green—and green, too, were the trees not far beyond, where the Turgai flowed.

Spring had come at last, after a long hard winter of little hope ; and already the marsh was crossed, as though it had never been. The soldiers, whistling and singing

cheerfully as they busied themselves cutting and binding the reeds, were already floating their bridges over the Turgai. Beyond, far as the eye could see, the sweet green grass of the Turgai country lay waiting, peaceful and unpeopled in the bright spring sun.

And Cedar-chab, like all others in the horde, waiting to cross, felt a new buoyancy in her heart, new hope where only a cold loneliness had been, shouting like a released prisoner, all through her young body, that now a new life, somehow, was about to begin.

CHAPTER TWO



The grasslands stretched to the north-east of Lake Chalkhar and the Turgai River, well above sea-level, watered by occasional springs and small streams flowing down to the lake and the Turgai. The land sloped gently upward, producing fine deep grass. Yet no people were here, except a few bands of Andins, stray nomads whose tribal and racial origins were unknown.

Along the north-east borders of this country, where the land was more wild and hilly, where the River Tobol flowed, lived the main tribes of the Little Horde, the Kirghiz-Kazaks—a savage and predatory people. These Kirghiz possessed few flocks or herds of their own, scorning the animal husbandry of more civilized nomadic people, such as the Torguts, calling them slaves. The women raised a few coarse cereals on the summer hillsides of the Tobol ; they lived largely by the hunt and by raids upon whatever pastoral people came near.

Thus the grasslands of the Turgai, despite fine pasture, were uninhabited.

Within a few days after crossing the Turgai, the Torgut horde had densely occupied this fresh green country. The new spring grass was already well grown in places, the waters of springs and streams were clear and sweet. Men and beasts alike had been cruelly worn and tired. But the spring air, the fine grass, the cool and sparkling water, soon refreshed them all.

From Ubasha's camp, situated on a green mound near

the centre of the horde, the khan could see the carts and animals of his people spread far and wide.

It was midday, the air was warm, a pleasant breeze was stirring. At the foot of the mound, where there were a few trees and spring-water bubbling out of the ground, the blue-and-white banners fluttered on their golden poles. On the little hillside, the khan's white summer tents were pitched; one of them, his family tent, was surmounted by a golden knob. On the crest of the mound a pavilion of heavy blue Chinese silk had been established, its open sides yielding a view of the countryside for miles in every direction, its blue ceiling, luminous with sunlight, seeming like a patch of deeper blue sky directly overhead.

Here the khan sat, bare-headed, feeling the spring wind brushing his black hair drawn tightly back over his head to a short queue. He wore a kalat of deep blue silk buttoned with silver discs, and a silver belt girdled his waist. His red silk cap and lambskin cloak lay on top of the ancient chest where the Torgut census rolls were kept. Several drawers of this chest were open, and the parchment lists were spread before him on a broad low table. But Ubasha, alone for a few moments, was gazing far away over the countryside.

The Torgut horde, pending the reports of scouts, was still compacted to an abnormal density over these pasture lands.

In the distance, a solid blur of people and tents and animals made it appear that every foot of ground was occupied; but nearer, in the foreground of this vast panorama, patches of grass could be seen.

To the Torguts, it seemed that each man and beast had his own bit of space again, no matter how small.

Ubasha sighed deeply; for the fine spring day, the new exhilaration of the horde, made him recall the more keenly how many of their people and animals had been lost on the way. . . . For a moment, closing his eyes, his

sensitive face quivered as images recurred, brutally real, of cold and death on the frozen steppes, in the Mugadir pass, on the marsh—as though he were still living each foot of the thousand miles they had come, each hour of the hundred and thirty days that had passed with such slow anguish.

Yet when he opened his eyes, then the panorama of pastoral peace that stretched beyond the horizon, that shimmered gently in the fresh sunlight, made remembered images of death seem unreal and fantastic. Only a residue of sadness remained—like a bitter taste on the tongue, that makes clear water seem less sweet than it is—giving a gentle melancholy to his gaze.

Once, Ubasha looked toward the tent crested with a golden knob, where his wife Mandere lay in the care of his sisters. But he could hear nothing, all seemed peaceful. He looked far off again, over the congregated hoshuns and aimaks of the people.

The horde, although packed less densely than in migration, still retained the appearance of a military encampment. Corridors of green grass, radiating to all points of the horizon like the spokes of a Russian carriage-wheel, seemed to narrow and disappear among carts and animals not more than a mile from where Ubasha sat. But this was an optical illusion, he knew ; for the green swathes led none the less through miles upon miles which the horde occupied, to the unknown grasslands that lay beyond. Ubasha kept watching the points of the eastern horizon where he knew these corridors led—as though, somehow, he might be able to see the distant advent of scouts returning from their survey of the outer lands. . . .

Suddenly a Turkish slave emerged from the gold-knobbed tent ; she hesitated a moment, and then ran up the mound and flung herself on the grass just outside the blue pavilion.

“Master,” she said.

Ubasha’s eyes closed tightly, his face became expressionless.

"Pain, she begun now," said the slave.

He could hear, it seemed, a muffled cry from the tent. His face twitched, and then he opened his eyes.

"Has the shaman been sent for, and the lama notified?" he said.

"Master, yes," said the slave, getting to her knees.

"Then return," said Ubasha gruffly, "and let me know when the shaman arrives."

The slave got to her feet and ran down the hill to the tent.

Now the time of the midday meal was ended, and Ubasha saw the Lama Kirik, his clerk, approaching the mound. The young lama, still munching, hastily wiped his fingers on his yellow gown as he started up the hill. The khan looked at him with vague interest. Seen thus, without his cloak, the young Lama Kirik, who had always been thin as a lance, seemed rounder in the middle. He lowered his eyes apologetically, still munching, still wiping his fingers, as he climbed toward the pavilion. Ubasha swallowed dryly, hearing a sudden cry from the tent. But he said pleasantly to the young lama :

"Kirik, you seem to be gaining weight, isn't it so?"

The lama gulped the last of his meat and raised his eyes to the sky, murmuring :

"The will of God, O khan. Surely it is a sin to let the good dead meat rot in the sun, without use. . . . Haven't you eaten?" he said abruptly, for he was a familiar of the khan, of the same age, having been reared and educated with Ubasha.

The khan glanced toward the tent, where Mandere was moaning now.

"I fast to-day," he said.

"Ah," said Kirik, smiling. "May God reward you with a son."

They resumed their clerical labours, sitting cross-legged on cushions of red and yellow silk stuffed with fine soft wool, bending over the census rolls on the low table.

Ordinarily, a census of people and animals was taken among the Torgut horde each fall. But in view of the terrible losses during the long migration, in view of planning a new life here in the Turgai lands, Ubasha had ordered a tentative spring estimate of people and animals. From all the shulengas of hoshuns, the saissangs and darkans of the aimaks, the princes and chieftains of the Torgut uluses, reports had been accumulating during the seven days since the Turgai was crossed. The Lama Kirik read these reports, while Ubasha made notations on the census rolls.

He used a French quill and German ink, gifts from the Tsarina for the Russian Christmas of 1770, which he had received in return for his gifts to her on the preceding Chagan-Sara—gifts that would “much please Her Imperial Majesty,” according to Kichinskoi’s blunt hint—consisting of twenty-five fine Bar-Kul ponies, one hundred poods of the finest wool, two thousand furs of marten and badger, and various minor items.

Ubasha dipped his quill in the ink and made notations, while Kirik read in a sing-song voice :

“Ulus of Sapsor, thirty-nine hundred and ninety yurts. Estimate of the lost and dead, twelve hundred old people, one hundred and fifty children, forty warriors. Animals lost and slaughtered, sheep fifty-two thousand, goats twenty-seven thousand, cattle twenty-nine thousand. Pack animals lost and died, oxen twelve hundred, horses and ponies three hundred, camels five. Estimate of the births, children two hundred male and two hundred thirty-five female, lambs none, calves fifteen hundred——”

Ubasha was aghast at these calamitous figures ; but when Kirik read the estimate of births, the khan’s attention wandered and he looked over his shoulder toward the white tent on the slope.

Bagha the Shaman had just arrived. A small crowd had begun to assemble, on the lower slope near the spring, to watch the conjurer prepare his device against evil luck and

the devil. Bagha glanced covertly up toward the blue pavilion.

He was dressed in the full ancient regalia of the Mongolian priesthood, a sight that always stirred archaic fears and superstitions, no matter how deeply buried or forgotten they might seem, even among the more devout and sectarian Buddhists who professed to regard Shamanism as only an ancient Mongolian barbarism utterly without meaning. Even the Lama Kirik ceased reading and he looked down the slope, narrowing his eyes, at the conjure-priest.

Bagha wore a leather cloak covered with tassels and long strips of leather, each tipped with iron. A red stoat-skin hung from his shoulder, and two black-and-white furs hung from his waist to the ground. His girdle was covered with brass balls and small pieces of iron which jingled whenever he moved. His head-dress consisted of a red leather cap, from which several crane plumes hung down his back, and a circlet of iron. From this circlet, two pointed horns rose over his temples, and little brass balls and droplets of glass hung over his eyes.

Bagha, conscious that all eyes were upon him, now assumed an air of complete aloofness as he began his preparations. He drove blood-red poles into the ground and spread a net in the air before the door of the tent, to trap the devil if he came near. Then, hearing a sudden sharp cry from Mandere, he began furiously beating a drum.

Ubasha rose slowly and walked down the slope.

For a moment he stood near the door of the tent, his face turned away from the small crowd of people assembled under the trees near the spring. Then he turned back, facing the people impassively, and he took a war club which the shaman handed him.

Several times he beat the air with this club, shaking it in every direction, crying in a hoarse voice the traditional words, "Devil, be off! Ghart-cheter! Be off, devil!"

When he had performed this ritual the requisite number of times, he flung the heavy club into the air.

Once more he faced the tent, which seemed mysteriously silent now that Bagha was belabouring his drum so frantically. Cedar-chab's head appeared for a moment, her face flushed, her eyes mysterious. She looked at her brother and nodded slowly, with a tremulous smile, and then she withdrew. Bagha ceased beating the drum and picked up his croziers, two rods covered with little bells and fragments of iron. He waved these in the air, beginning to whirl and leap about under the net, the fur and leather strips on his cloak snapping back and forth around his body, all his bells and glass balls and trinkets of iron jingling, stamping the earth with iron-shod boots and shouting wildly as he danced. Ubasha, leaving the tent where Mandere's screams could no longer be heard, returned up the slope to his blue pavilion.

The khan and the lama resumed their work with the census rolls.

But all the time, now, the khan's gaze kept wandering along the green corridors to the distant horizon, and his ears kept listening acutely for Mandere's screams, which he feared yet hoped to hear, somehow, in spite of the shaman's frightful noise.

Once in a while, he thought of the appalling figures of loss he was noting on the edge of the census rolls. Nearly a tenth of the horses and beasts of burden, much more than half of the cattle and goats and sheep ! and nearly a tenth of the people, mostly the old, but the young as well, had died ! Could such things be ? . . . But when he looked over the fine broad land of the Turgai, thickly dotted with people and beasts, then all seemed serene and stirring with new hope under the afternoon sun. Surely the herds would soon be replenished by births, he thought. And of the people, fewest of all had been lost. It was the Torgut people, really, who comprised the true wealth of the horde. From them, too, was already springing new life and hope, and soon they

would be stronger than ever, more secure, more happy than before, here in their new home.

And when Ubasha thought these things, his gentle eyes misted a little, straining his ears for a wail from the tent, straining his eyes for riders from beyond.

It was mid-afternoon before scouts and messengers, long overdue, began to arrive. The early reports were pleasant. Scouts who had been in the east told that the land stretched in a gentle slope more than a hundred miles before the eastern hills, barren and dry, began. . . . The reports came in more rapidly, now, and new people arrived at the pavilion, Chereng, Bambar, Choktu, Zebek. They listened to the final tally of estimated losses, and to the news the messengers brought. They asked, too, for news of Mandere. Zebek, who seemed in fine humour, was most solicitous. But neither sound nor sign came from the tent, nothing but Bagha's continual shouts and imprecations.

New reports from the border-lands were less pleasant to hear than the earlier ones. Scouts from the south brought news that the pasture grass gave way to desert growth not more than thirty miles down the eastern shore of Lake Chalkhar, except for a narrow and rather reedy strip of land along the very edge of the lake ; messengers from the south-east brought word that desert lay in that direction, too, not far south and all the way east to the barren hills. Bambar and Choktu frowned at these reports, and only Zebek seemed unperturbed ; Ubasha listened with an abstracted air, glancing more and more frequently toward the tent with the golden knob.

Then the khan's chief herdsman, Shamba the Old, came deferentially up the slope and paused. He bowed to the princes seated on silk cushions in the blue pavilion, and he motioned to the khan. Ubasha rose and went part way down the slope, where he squatted in the grass with Shamba.

The herdsman took a pouch and a pipe from his cotton

kalat, which was grimy with blood and grease, and he offered tobacco to the khan. When they had smoked for a moment or two, the old man said :

"The ewes are beginning to lamb."

Ubasha blinked, he puffed hard on his pipe. Then he said slowly :

"This is interesting, Shamba."

"Yes, they're lambing all right," said the herdsman, looking curiously at the khan, who had spoken in a strange tone of voice.

"Ah," said Ubasha, relaxing a little, "that's good."

Old Shamba took his pipe from his mouth and pointed to a large flock of Ubasha's ewes which had been segregated not far from the foot of the slope. He gestured toward those which had been marked for lambing, and said brusquely :

"Yes, but the lambs so far have been poorly, some mis-formed, many dead. It's all a result of things, you understand. And the ewes are labouring too hard, look at my kalat—there's far and away too much blood——"

The khan's face twitched, he jerked to his feet suddenly and walked rapidly up the slope, his face white as wool. Shamba the Old, looking after the khan, scratched his head and then went back down the slope, muttering and scratching his head all the way. Ubasha, back in the blue pavilion, took one furtive look at the lambing ewes beyond the foot of the mound, and then turned his drawn face toward the gold-knobbed tent.

But there was still nothing, Bagha was whirling and shouting, there was still no further news from Mandere.

Ubasha rejoined the princes.

The latest reports, now coming by messengers from the north-east and the north, were conflicting. Good pastures lay fairly well to the north-east, perhaps one hundred and fifty miles ; although the valleys in that direction were steep and narrow, yet their floors were grassy and well-

watered. But in the north, the hills of the Tobol were barely a hundred miles away ; access to the river itself would be extremely difficult for flocks and herds, although the hills could easily be scaled by riders. And while the scouts had carefully avoided the new Russian forts of Orsk and Orenberg—the latter of which was named after the provincial capital many miles to the west, where General Traubenberg and the Russian army were said to be—nevertheless, messengers had seen great troops of Kirghiz-Kazaks on the northern slopes of the Tobol valley, all making their way westward toward Fort Orenberg, it appeared, which was situated on the Tobol near the Turgai headwaters, not much more than one hundred miles to the north. . . .

The princes heard these reports and began talking excitedly.

Choktu and Chereng began an argument about this Turgai country to which they had come, whose shape and extent they now vaguely knew. Altogether, it seemed less broad and wide than fifteen thousand square miles, bordered by deserts and hills and savage plundering tribes on the north. Choktu pointed out, half-heartedly, that such grasslands were large enough for their depleted flocks and herds. But Chereng, smiling, said :

“For summer pasture, perhaps it will do—with great economy and crowding. But then, O Choktu, what shall we do for winter lands?”

“Another point,” said Bambar, “I’d like to know, what about those rascally Kirghiz? They’re up to mischief, count on that. Are we going to have them around our necks till doomsday?”

“Yes,” Choktu said with sudden conviction, “what about that—do we want to fight every foot and hour of our lives? It’s one thing for warriors, and another thing for shepherds, I tell you.”

“Well spoken, O Choktu,” said Chereng, softly.

“These lands are not very large, it’s true,” said Choktu,

with a defiant look at Chereng. "If they were, I'd say other words than these."

"And what says our good khan, Ubasha?" Chereng said, with a mocking smile.

Ubasha looked around at the princes, bewildered and harassed. What were they saying? that the land of the Turgai was poor? All of them, even Choktu, seemed to be saying strange things. Only Zebek, smiling and watchful, had nothing to say. Ubasha wet his lips and said:

"But whose messages are these, that we take such things for truth?"

"From Momotubash, in the south," said Zebek, speaking for the first time.

"And in the north?"

"Temuru," said Zebek, gently.

"Ah," said Ubasha unhappily, gnawing his moustaches, glancing toward the tent where his wife lay in labour. He listened a moment, absently, to Bagha's screeching and jingling. Then, as though with great difficulty recalling himself, he said, "Perhaps the reports have come to us wrong, perhaps these are false things. For this is fine land, and here we stay," he said vaguely.

"Likely enough," said Zebek, surprisingly agreeing with the khan. "These are groundless fears, perhaps—and as Ubasha says, here we are, and here we will probably stay."

The khan blinked and smiled, he pressed Zebek's hand fervently, unable to speak. Zebek took the occasion to draw Ubasha aside, not releasing his hand.

"And now we are settled in such fine country, cousin," he said quietly, with a deprecating smile, "perhaps it's time to speak of a certain matter in more specific terms."

Ubasha tried to withdraw his hand, flushing.

"But," he said confusedly, "but nothing is settled—now is a time of uncertainty——"

Zebek retained the khan's hand in a strong grip, smiling brightly.

"Nonsense," he said loudly, concealing their hand-clasp under the folds of their silken kalats. "I don't recall when prospects were better, more sure."

He pressed Ubasha's hand gently twelve times. Perspiration formed on the khan's high and delicate forehead.

"But my herdsman, Shamba the Old," Ubasha said, "tells me the ewes are lambing poorly."

Zebek smiled, and he pressed the khan's hand fifteen times.

"Even so," he said pleasantly, "from fifteen hundred sheep, one can expect a good harvest of lambs, isn't it so?"

Chereng nudged Bambar, and whispered something behind his hand. The old prince stroked his moustaches and smiled. Only Choktu remained sombre, listening to a new report from the north.

The khan looked down the slope toward his white tent, where Bagha was beginning to beat his drum again. He muttered desperately :

"But, cousin, we are expecting new mouths to feed——"

"May it be a boy," said Zebek, closing his lids over a cold glitter that came into his eyes, pressing Ubasha's hand with two heavy clasps, saying, "It is time that our Torgut people have a strong heir of the khan."

Merghen, who had joined Zebek's ulus as Gedesu's herdsman, just now arrived with Lev Zolotsky ; they dismounted near the trees at the foot of the slope, and came half-way up toward the blue pavilion.

Merghen blinked, the late afternoon sunlight was directly in his eyes. He squinted, and then said to Lev :

"Two thousand ! He just offered Ubasha two thousand sheep ! Can he afford it, friend Lev ?"

"Great herdsman, fine companion," said Lev, smiling benevolently, "what cannot a great prince afford ?"

"Listen, it doesn't worry me," Merghen whispered excitedly, "I don't care if you milk Gedesu dry as an old goat. But surely, two thousand sheep !"

"Young shepherd, unthinking cowhand," said Lev weightily, "with two thousand sheep one buys much more than Cedar-chab."

The Khan Ubasha was thinking much the same thing as Lev. He sighed deeply, his hand prisoned tightly by his cousin. Zebek, after a short hesitation, squeezed three times. Ubasha glanced nervously toward the white tent where Mandere lay. He thought of Cedar-chab, he couldn't afford to offend his cousin. If what Shamba the Old said were true, hard times were upon them, no matter what came. Perhaps such a large increase in the khan's flock as Zebek was offering would be needed before long.

Across the pavilion, Ubasha noted a few herdsmen arriving, embarrassed and shy in their dirty clothes, reporting to the princes that the ewes had begun to lamb poorly.

Ubasha wet his lips, perspiring in spite of the cool dusk beginning to creep over the Turgai land. He thought of Mandere, he thought of Cedar-chab. Yet there were the Kirghiz on the north, the lack of winter pasture, not enough land! Zebek and the princes, even two fellows standing on the slope, were staring at him. Ubasha saw the Lama Kirik, his clerk, portly and slow, coming through the trees at the foot of the mound. He thought of the census rolls, the great losses, the hard times ahead, the long and terrible migration just ended; and his eyes misted in the afternoon dusk, thinking how the people needed rest and security more than all else. Yes, he thought more firmly—more than Cedar-chab, more than all else, he needed friends for the people. Perhaps this was why Zebek had spoken agreeably—perhaps Zebek would be content, with Cedar-chab, to remain in the land of the Turgai.

Slowly Ubasha turned to face his cousin, feeling confused and helpless, about to yield to Zebek.

But suddenly, from the corner of his eye, the khan saw that Kirik was followed by the Lama Loosang, clad in ceremonial robes, and that two altar-boys preceded them,

carrying candles and incense and the silver baptismal basin of the Torgut khans.

Ubasha's mouth had opened part way, but he said nothing.

All became silent now, watching the procession toward the white tent with the golden knob.

At the door of the tent, Bagha and Loosang stared at one another a moment. The lama looked down with smiling tolerance at the little man in the outlandish clothes. And Bagha, now quiet and crestfallen, gathering together his paraphernalia, could only snort with contempt for the lama's mystical tools, the candles and incense and silver baptismal font. . . .

All watched, breathlessly, while the chief lama of the Torguts entered the tent of the khan's wife, bearing with him the holy symbols of birth.

There was a scream, ending in a long wail, and then a faint quivering cry.

Ubasha's face blanched, perspiration poured down his delicate face, he clenched his hands. The tent was silent, overhead the black and white birds sailed in the golden air of twilight. Finally the Lama Loosang came from the tent, and he came slowly up the slope to where the khan stood nervously at the edge of the blue pavilion ; and the lama whispered quietly in Ubasha's ear.

Tears came to the khan's eyes, and he turned for a moment to look over the twilit land of the Turgai. Here and there, all the way to the glowing horizon, fires were springing up pale but luminous as fireflies in the dusk. Slowly he turned back to the princes.

"God's will," said Choktu hoarsely, "what is it?"

Lev and Merghen had sidled up to Zebek, unobtrusively, and Lev was whispering hurriedly :

"Mighty lord, shrewd bargainer—we have news——"

"Yes, all the ewes in the ulus are beginning to lamb—but poorly, and with much blood and death!" said Merghen.

Zebek waved them aside, his eyes on Ubasha.

"Don't bother me with trifles!" he said abstractedly. And to the khan he said harshly, "Yes, cousin—what's the news?"

Ubasha opened his mouth several times before he could speak, and then he smiled mistily all around.

"It's a boy!" he said wonderingly. "All is well, a boy—all's well!"

He turned, overcome with emotion, and seized Zebek's hand. His father-in-law Erranpal, accompanied by slaves with torches, was already handing snuff and tobacco all around to the princes. The blue pavilion glowed with light in the spring dusk. All was well, thought Ubasha—the ewes, the winter lands, even the Kirghiz north of the Turgai land! . . . Fervently, his fine face beaming, Ubasha pressed his cousin Zebek's hand with ten long and confident clasps.

CHAPTER THREE



On the following day, not long after dawn, Subutai and a troop of horsemen were riding north along the eastern bank of the Turgai River. A morning mist was still rising from the water, from the green marshes in the west. Great flocks of wild-fowl were taking the air, soaring high and graceful in the pearly sky where the light was already warmed by the sun. Subutai and the soldiers rode at a pleasant trot, listening to the cries of birds and to a quiet tune Norbo was meditatively whistling.

Subutai rode alone at the head of the troop ; his lean cheeks, lined with care, relaxed a little in the freshness and quiet of morning.

He had returned from the north only at dusk the night before, bearing news of a clash between some of Temuru's men and a band of Bashkirs—important news, because it meant that the Bashkir tribes had probably been roused by the Kirghiz against the Torgut people. Leaving the blue pavilion, where the princes were celebrating the birth of Ubasha's son, he had returned to the grove at the foot of the slope where his horse was tethered.

He lingered there a moment, conscious for the first time in weeks of his filthy clothes. He felt no envy for the silks and jewels of the princes. But in the cleanliness of dusk, the clear and pallid light of stars and twilight fires, the fresh green leaves and grass and the dark, cool water bubbling from the ground, he felt suddenly a disgust for his almost barbaric condition. For more than two months he had

been steadily in the saddle. He had slept in his clothes ; they were the same clothes in which he had fought, they were stained with blood ; and in the mud of marsh and river bank he had laboured and sweated in these clothes.

For a moment, in these clean and pastoral surroundings, he thought of Cedar-chab—and in that very moment, she appeared. She came from the tent where Mandere had just ended her labour. It was nearly dark, but he could see her face in the dusk clearly, luminous and pale as the moon. She looked toward him a moment, and then she smiled. And he smiled in return, and mounted his horse.

In the twilight, there in the Turgai land, they had seen one another and smiled. It was the first time he had seen her closely since the night of Chagan-Sara, on the Aral plain. But in all the time between—the passage of the Mugadir hills, the struggle through drifts and melting snow and marsh-lands, the constant pursuit of Kirghiz guerrillas, the crossing of the Irgiz and Turgai Rivers, the expedition to the Tobol in the north—in all this time he had remembered the touch of her lips and the meaning of her words. And in his heart there no longer was fear, or jealousy. . . . In the dusk, after many weeks, they could smile at one another and move apart again ; for between them was something stronger than space and time.

Thus Cedar-chab, smiling back over her shoulder in the spring dusk, went toward the blue pavilion. And Subutai, mounting his horse, rode off into the night. . . .

Riding along the bank of the Turgai now, in the mist and early sunlight of morning, he listened to the sweet and melancholy cries of birds. Already the troops had left the northernmost hoshuns of the horde far behind ; they were patrolling the bank of the river northward. The sun rose in the sky slowly, lifting the mist up toward clouds high and white, making Subutai feel lonely yet serene.

In the night, he had slept with Yelden. When Yelden tried to talk of the herds, Subutai yawned—it was no matter

to him what animals he had. Flocks, herds, were from another life. Yelden told of Gedesu, how he took more than a third of Grandma's wealth, leaving the rest in Yelden's care. Many of the animals had been lost in the drifts and marshes, since Gedesu had left Subutai the poorest beasts of all. Yelden spoke with anger of Gedesu's tricks and schemes. But Subutai waved a weary hand. What was lost, was gone—and whatever was left was Yelden's care.

"Perhaps," Subutai said vaguely, "when we get settled—when things are different——"

"I don't know," Yelden said, suddenly low in spirit. "Will we ever be settled again?"

The two friends lay on the ground, wrapped in their cloaks, smoking reflectively. Near-by were Yelden's carts and his summer tent, where his wife and children were sleeping. The tent was made of coarse dark cloth, blackened by smoke and weather. In the moonlight the tent seemed blacker than ever, and the spring wool of the sheep appeared far whiter than during the day. Sheep and cattle, some grazing quietly in the night, some resting and sleeping with their legs doubled under their bodies, were all about. Yelden and Subutai smoked, watching the moon move slowly among the stars, and finally Subutai spoke.

"This is not our land, Yelden," he said slowly. "It is fine land, but not enough—not worth the lives it would cost to keep."

"What, are the Kirghiz so near?"

"Not more than a hundred miles in the north."

"But where can we go then, Subutai?"

Subutai shrugged.

"Some say, Djungaria."

"Is it far, Subutai?"

"More than two times as far as we've already come."

"Ah," sighed Yelden. "But perhaps there are other lands."

"Perhaps."

"In the meantime, the ewes are beginning to lamb—it's a poor time to move——"

"People are tired, too. Nothing is yet decided," said Subutai.

"I tell you," Yelden said, with sudden vehemence, "if it were up to the people to decide, you'd see—they wouldn't move another step! It's suicide. Why, with the herds and flocks as they are—the lambing already poorly begun——"

"The people can decide as they wish, Yelden."

"How?" the herdsman said, cynically.

"Why, by deciding to stay, or whatever they choose," said Subutai.

"But some would say yes," said Yelden, "and some would say no."

"Yet nearly all of the people said yes, Yelden, to leaving the Volga lands."

"Ah, but that was different! All the princes were of the same mind, so were the people. And look where it got us—fine land, you say, but not enough. Will we all be of the same mind, now?"

"If we can't stay, neither can we return," said Subutai. "What we have begun, Yelden, we must properly finish—if not here, then in other lands. Isn't it so?"

Yelden sighed.

"Perhaps so," he said, "yet there will be many who'd rather return perhaps. Why, look you, Subutai—if we go south in the deserts now, there will be few animals left. Just in the case of your own, already many are gone. And the remainder are too poorly to lamb and calf properly, even with proper rest. All will be lost, Subutai."

Subutai lay on his back and looked up at the scattered stars, through which the moon was moving in a path sure and steady, like the stars themselves. And at last he said, slowly:

"No matter, Yelden. Men can choose truly no path but one. And when we reach the land we seek, all will be well.

Here we rest in the Turgai land, Yelden, because we did choose a path of action one time. Now we can only decide to go on, in the same path."

"Ah," said Yelden, "you've been listening to the priests and philosophers."

"No," said Subutai. "They say such things to make us less free than we are, perhaps. . . . We may seem to travel the same path as they wish, Yelden, but we must make the goal we seek our own."

"Then what?" Yelden murmured sleepily. "Where do you get such words?"

Subutai looked at the declining moon, less bright, sinking in the night, sinking among the cool mist of the marsh-lands in the west.

"From Temudjin, the Genghis Khan," he said then. "From him came a great truth we must keep, Yelden—that the glory of an action is, it must be complete."

"Complete ruin, perhaps," murmured Yelden, turning on his side and beginning to snore.

Subutai had lain awake, then, for still a few moments. He listened drowsily to the sounds of the sleepers, the herds; he gazed from under his eyelids at the misty moon. Where all things would be well again, was unknown. All things were shrouded, like the moon by mist, in time. But a calm, a sureness like that of the moon or sun, had come upon Subutai now. And when he slept at last, it was the untroubled sleep of a man sure of one thing at least—himself.

For Subutai, riding north on the Turgai in the morning light, was a man changed from the youth he had been not long ago. The brutality of death he had learned, the labour and endless vigilance of the long migration, the feeling of responsibility for more than his own interests—these things had left their marks. It was not only his face, lean and lined with care, nor his manner and bearing now reserved and quiet, it was not these things alone that

marked his change. More than all else, the change seemed somehow in his eyes. His gaze seemed focused far away, his eyes seemed deep in thought, yet vigilant. His eyes were those of a man who has seen and suffered, of a man whose spirit has become tempered unbreakably, of a man with a deep and determined thought in his gaze. . . .

So it was, now, that Subutai rode alone at the head of his troop, patrolling the Turgai northward in full sunlight—and that he seemed to gaze farther ahead, somehow, than the most distant trees and hills.

It was Subutai who first saw the three horsemen, on the western bank of the Turgai, emerging from a small grove of trees above the river bank.

He lifted his hand and the troop came to a halt. A few of the men pressed forward a little, peering ahead.

"Who are they, do you think?" said Subutai.

"Kirghiz, perhaps," said Norbo.

"Not Kirghiz," said Batu, shading his eyes and squinting at the distant riders, who were now fording the river, swimming their horses where the water was deep. It was too far for their clothing to be determined, yet Batu said, "See, they sit like Cossacks, stiffly, the way the Russians have learned."

A murmur of excitement rose among the men.

"Where could they come from, what do they want?"

"Let's ride forward and see," said Subutai. "Take care to approach without danger, yet we must capture them safely to see what they want and where they are from."

Now the Torgut troop rode in the shadow of trees, where they could, and sometimes they rode away from the river in order to pass behind a low ridge. Yet soon they were seen, crossing a meadow where no trees or hills concealed their approach. And then the Cossacks, who had taken no precautions to hide their own presence, came spurring their horses toward Subutai and the men.

"Khan Tengri!" cried Norbo, unshouldering his musket. "They must be crazy!"

"Wait!" said Subutai. "They come in peace!"

One of the three Cossack riders had lifted a piece of white linen on the tip of his drawn sword, which he held high in the air as he rode toward the Torguts.

Subutai signalled a halt, and he awaited the Russians watchfully in the midst of the meadow, his Bar-Kul mare bending her head to crop some spring flowers blooming in the new grass. The leader's two Cossack companions halted at a distance, and he rode forward to meet Subutai.

"I am Lieutenant Galinsky, officer of Her Imperial Majesty, Catherine the Second of Russia," he said formally, lowering his sword and retrieving his linen handkerchief. Then he smiled pleasantly at Subutai. "Does anyone here speak Russian?"

"I do," said Subutai, "a little. Where are you from?"

"From the Fort Orenberg," said Galinsky, "from General Traubenberg—with messages from His Excellency for the Khan of the Torguts, Ubasha."

"What?" cried Subutai. "But Traubenberg——"

"His Excellency has travelled by forced march from Orsk," said Galinsky, smiling. "We arrived at Orsk from the garrison at Orenberg Province some days ago. The Russian army is quartered less than ten days' travel from here."

The Torguts murmured excitedly.

Subutai looked around swiftly.

"Norbo and Tuluku will return with me," he said.

"Batu, take the rest of the troop and continue patrol."

He wheeled his horse, riding south with Galinsky; and the two Cossack riders, accompanied by Norbo and Tuluku, fell in close behind.

Subutai and the Russian lieutenant conversed as they rode.

General Traubenberg and 20,000 soldiers were waiting

at Fort Orenberg, Subutai learned. They had moved quickly, once the news had come from the Volga. Beketoff, governor of Astrakhan, had imprisoned Kichinskoi and carried him north, where the former High Commissioner to the Torguts was now waiting trial at the Tsarina's court. The commander of the garrison at Fort Koulagina had first started pursuit of the Torguts, when the siege was lifted, but he had been caught in the blizzard; he had returned to the fort and sent messengers north to Orenberg. The, Kirghiz and Bashkirs of the Tobol country had been roused, once Trautenberg had reached Orsk. Now they were all assembled, a total force of nearly 40,000, at Fort Orenberg, on the Tobol near the Turgai head-waters.

This was disastrous news.

The Russian officer seemed pleasant and carefree, chatting with Subutai as they rode toward the horde and then through the miles upon miles of Torgut camps. But Subutai, thinking of his people, became silent and stern as they approached the blue pavilion where Ubasha and the princes were gathered again.

Lieutenant Galinsky jumped from his horse and ran lightly up the mound toward the startled council members. Subutai, halting at a distance, said :

"A messenger from the Russian General, Trautenberg."

The princes gasped.

The Russian lieutenant clicked his heels and bowed. He delivered his message. Zebek translated, smiling curiously at Ubasha while he spoke.

"The Tsarina orders us to return," he said. "Otherwise, Trautenberg with the Kirghiz and Bashkirs will attack."

Exclamations burst from the princes in the blue pavilion.

"To return?" cried Choktu. And Bambar said, staring with unbelieving eyes at the Russian, "To the Volga, he means?"

Ubasha's face had turned pale.

"Very well," he said, waving a hand toward Galinsky. "Let the messengers have drink and food while they wait."

Galinsky bowed and withdrew. Subutai conducted him and his companions down the slope to the grove, where their horses drank at the spring and then grazed in the grass; the men sat under the trees, served by Turkish slaves bringing meat and arrack from Ubasha's camp. From time to time, the men looked up the hill toward the blue pavilion, where the princes talked and gesticulated without result. Tuluku, when he had eaten, went to visit his wife. Norbo asked permission to wander around, to see what he might learn. Finally Subutai said to the Russian lieutenant:

"This is bad news you bring."

Galinsky smacked his lips over some arrack.

"Kumiss is good, too," he said. "You fellows know how to live. With us it's always the same thing, vodka, morning and night, all seasons."

Subutai lit his pipe and said:

"Vodka is bad, it makes a man foolish or else he wants to kill without cause."

The Russian smiled, then.

"The worst of it is," he said confidentially, leaning toward Subutai, "these Kirghiz and Bashkir dogs are spoiling for war. There's little telling how long we can hold them at Orenberg—Nurali and a fellow, a Prince Beran, have been stirring them up."

"Beran?" Subutai said stiffening.

"Ah," said Galinsky, "I see you don't like him, either."

Subutai smiled grimly.

"I could have killed him, once."

"What!" cried Galinsky. "Are you the fellow who fought Beran at Koulagina?"

He smiled delightedly at Subutai.

"He wouldn't fight," Subutai said drily.

"Well! I'm delighted to meet you," said Galinsky.

"But I wish you'd finished him off, the haughty dog!"

"Perhaps I shall," said Subutai.

"God forbid," said Galinsky. "I hope you people are sensible and have no more trouble, now."

Noon came, and the afternoon began. Norbo returned, bearing a story of messengers from the south. It seemed that two men had arrived from the Khara Kum desert, south of Lake Chalkhar—messengers who had come all the way from the distant Volga. They brought messages from Galdan and Donderkov, who had remained on the west bank of the Volga when the migration began. Donderkov and Galdan, according to their report, had finally risen against the Cossacks and were travelling toward the Khara Kum desert to join the Torgut horde. They had slaughtered all the Cossack troops, the people in towns and hamlets, the German settlers near Sarepta. They had burned and destroyed all the forts and towns on the west banks of the Volga, leaving nothing but death and destruction from Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea to Saratov in the north. . . .

This news was already travelling like fire through the horde. When Norbo was telling of these things, already Subutai could see a commotion up in the blue pavilion, far away on the top of the grassy mound. The two messengers from Donderkov, dusty and tired, were making their report to Ubasha and the assembled princes. In all the near-by hoshuns, excited shouts could be heard.

Galinsky stirred nervously, glancing all around at the strange people into whose midst he had come. He said, in an undertone to Subutai :

"This is bad, this news will excite your people. These things, too, the Tsarina will never forgive."

Subutai said tensely :

"Wait—we'll see——"

But it was still a long time before Ubasha summoned Galinsky. When Subutai and the Russian lieutenant went up the slope to the blue pavilion again, they found all the princes silent and glum. Zebek and Chereng were scowling

angrily. Choktu and Bambar looked puzzled, lost in thought. Ubasha himself, his face paler than before, was looking out from under the shadowing blue silk at the sunlit panorama of the vast Torgut horde.

"Lieutenant," he said at last, turning to Galinsky. "You will return to General Traubenberg and say, The Torguts will return whence they came."

"No, you can't say that!" muttered Zebek, staring at the white knuckles of his clenched fist.

"On one condition," said Ubasha, "that all the blame for what has occurred falls on the Khan of the Torguts, myself."

"But you can't say that, either," Choktu said desperately.

"Say that Ubasha Khan," said Ubasha, in a clear voice, "will offer himself as hostage, if such terms are understood."

Galinsky bowed, when the khan's words had been translated—for Ubasha, although he knew Russian well, had chosen to phrase his message in the Torgut tongue. Chereng, raising his eyes, said:

"Fellow. Will Traubenberg understand such terms?"

When Subutai translated this question, Galinsky frowned.

"Your Excellency," he said, with a brittle bow. "I'm merely an officer of the line, I can't say. But it's my personal impression, if that's what you want, no—these are not the Tsarina's terms."

Chereng relaxed a little, and Zebek ceased to scowl. Only Bambar and Choktu, still deep in thought, seemed more puzzled than before.

"Nevertheless," said Ubasha firmly, "convey these messages, soldier. Say that our people seek only peace and freedom, wherever the land. Say that here on the Turgai, or back in the Volga lands, we wish to live as men, in harmony with Her Imperial Majesty and all her people. . . . And you, captain," he said to Subutai, "see that our Russian messengers go safely on the road to Orenberg."

Galinsky bowed again, and the soldiers withdrew once more down the hill. Soon they were dashing north through the horde, toward the Turgai, riding in late afternoon sunlight on the eastern bank of the river. Once they saw, far off over the grasslands, a small troop of men galloping furiously southward toward the Torgut camps. And then again, later, a whole great host of riders passed in the distance, bearing rapidly south. Yet Subutai's small party rode far to the north of where they had first met, in the morning, and still there were no signs of Batu and the others. Finally, they crossed the river; and there, on the west bank of the Turgai, Subutai took leave of Galinsky.

"From here to Orenberg," he said, "you can find your way safely."

"May you go in peace, too," said the Russian lieutenant.

Subutai sat watching the three Cossacks until they were lost from sight, beyond a shadowy hill. Then he turned his horse and faced Norbo and Tuluku.

"Let us rest here for a time," he said. "Batu will probably return at dusk."

His two companions dismounted eagerly, turning their horses loose to graze in the sparse grass here on the higher land north of the marsh. They lay on the ground, shading their eyes from the sun. Soon they were sleeping. Subutai smiled at his friends, sleeping as though they were somewhere safe in their own land. He himself kept watch on the strange hills, the shadowed water, the rolling slopes east of the Turgai. After a time, he woke Norbo.

"Your turn."

"At your service," said Norbo, grinning as soon as he woke.

Subutai cushioned his head on his hands, he slept. Norbo watched for Batu and the troop to return on their evening patrol. The green slopes across the river grew ever more quiet and dark. The afternoon faded, dusk came, and

the insects of nightfall began to drone in the cooler air. Norbo's head began to nod, and soon he was sleeping again. . . .

Subutai woke suddenly, sitting up, startled to find it had grown dark and cold. He muttered sharply :

“Norbo?”

There was no answer. He listened ; he could hear the horses moving somewhere near-by in the grass. Then he heard the slow breathing, the snores of his two friends, sleeping not far away. He was about to shout angrily at them ; but he checked himself just in time.

On a sudden gust of night-wind from over the river, there came the acrid smoke of burning grass and the sound of distant, confused shouting.

Subutai leapt to his feet.

Now he could see, hazily outlining the trees on the east bank of the Turgai, a wall of flame advancing southward through the grasslands. The dry grass of last season, not yet trampled nor sufficiently overgrown with fresh grass, was blazing at a dozen points all the way to the eastern horizon. Dense clouds of smoke rolled ahead of the flames. The tongues of fire crackled distantly, like a horde of locusts advancing through the grass, swarming suddenly forward from under the blanket of smoke. And the dark night sky, above and behind the rolling smoke, glowed luridly.

Subutai bent swiftly and shook Norbo and Tuluku. They awoke, startled and confused. Norbo began to apologize for having fallen asleep on watch. But it was no time for blaming Norbo, thought Subutai, nor to consider his own stupidity in halting here for a nap. He checked Norbo's rush of guilty words, and pointed toward the great fire in the east.

Now all three men looked and listened intently.

It seemed to Subutai, once more, that he could hear a vast medley of shouts, distant, but closer than before.

Softly, then, he whistled to his horse. The wiry white Bar-Kul mare came trotting toward him through the dark. He swung into his saddle, signalling his friends to follow, and rode cautiously toward the north. After they had ridden some miles up the western bank of the river, they came to a deep and shadowy gully that led down from a hill to the Turgai. Here they paused, for now they could clearly detect the shouting of many men.

"Kirghiz!" whispered Norbo tensely, fingering his musket.

Tuluku listened, and after a moment he said:

"Bashkirs, too!"

Subutai said nothing, motioning for silence.

The three Torguts gazed over the river at a terrifying sight. The whole pasture of the Turgai, from here south, seemed afire. Behind the flames, galloping this way and that over the burnt stubble, shouting fiercely, rode thousands upon thousands of savage warriors, Kirghiz and Bashkirs, shaking lances and war-clubs and guns. Some of them dashed madly forward at times into the smoke and flames wherever the fire seemed dying a little, fanning the flames southward, shouting wild imprecations as they fled away from the smoke again. The three Torguts gripped their muskets tensely.

Subutai's eyes glowed, the reflected fire seemed to burn deep in his head, his voice was brittle.

"Now we must hasten," he said,— "we must outrun the flames and the mad dogs——"

But Norbo lifted a hand, whispering suddenly:

"Sh! don't move!"

Just as he spoke, several Kirghiz riders emerged from the trees, not far away on the east bank of the river. For a moment they could be seen clearly, leading a troop of riderless horses down toward the water. Their caps, pointed like Saracen helmets, were sharply illumined by the fire. Then they rode down the bank, splashing through the

shadowy water, fording the river toward the gully where the Torguts were concealed.

The Kirghiz horses swam clumsily, in the deeper part of the stream. Midway, they emerged from the shadows ; the glow of the burning plain revealed them swimming in midstream toward the western shore. The current seemed swift, but the riderless horses swam sturdily, tangling their long halters around the bodies of their captors.

" Ah god ! " said Tuluku, suddenly. " It's Batu's horse—and all the others ! "

Norbo, without thinking of the consequences, raised his musket angrily. Before Subutai noticed what his comrade was doing, Norbo fired at the Kirghiz who came in the lead.

The man jerked, seemed to leap from his horse, toppled into the stream. His companions, startled, turned their horses and started back toward the eastern shore.

Now Subutai and Tuluku, seeing that their presence was known, fired at the fleeing Kirghiz. One of the enemies threw his arms in the air and then slumped forward, clinging to the neck of his horse. Norbo looked pleadingly toward Subutai—and for a moment Subutai had a mad impulse to dash after the Kirghiz, too, and re-capture the horses of Batu and the murdered Torgut troops.

But at that moment, when the Kirghiz reached the eastern bank and scrambled among the reeds and shadows of the shore, a large company of Kirghiz swarmed out of the dark, shouting and asking questions, pointing across the stream toward the dark gully, spurring their horses down toward the water.

Subutai and his friends turned quietly and rode swiftly over the hill. Behind, they could hear the shouts and splashing of men and horses, crossing the Turgai. The Kirghiz horses slipped clumsily on rocks and stones, crashed against bushes on the shore, whinnied unhappily in the dark hills. The Torgut horses, swift and sure-footed in the dark,

galloped south. The moon had not yet risen, but south where the hills ended the glow of the fire faintly illumined the river bank. The three Torgut warriors, having out-distanced their pursuers, began seeking a place where they might cross the Turgai.

The fire had reached a stretch of extremely dry grass, through which it raced with new speed, crackling and filling the air with bitter smoke.

The Torguts continued southward along the edge of the marsh, riding a narrow strip of dry land near the river's edge, almost reaching Lake Rinkul before they could cross.

Here, over the river, the grasslands where the Torgut encampments had been were now silent and dark. In the east, the pale spring moon was slowly rising.

Subutai plunged down the bank, followed by Norbo and Tuluku.

They had come fast, but not so fast as the Kirghiz warrior whom Norbo had shot. His body, twisting and turning in midstream, floated past. His cap had gone, his black hair swirled about his face like marsh grass. And his legs, weighted by Kirghiz knee-boots with high heels, rose and buckled and disappeared in the dark flood-waters of the Turgai. He drifted past swiftly, and the Torguts paused briefly when the body passed and then their horses swam on.

They rode out of the water and onto the land. Toward the rising moon, they galloped silently. They found darkness and quiet where the Torgut hoshuns had been.

In the north, the fire was already near. Great thick billows of smoke rolled south over the land, obscuring the clear moon, turning it red. Where the camps had been, the grass was trampled and cropped, a litter of debris gleamed in the ruddy moonlight. Carts and pots and tent-poles, all sorts of things had been left behind. The land of the Turgai was deserted again, lying dark in the path of the fire, lit by a red moon.

It was as though all the terrors of the world, including

fire, were assembled against the Torgut Banner and all their people.

Silently, with scarcely a glance at the surging and crackling flames behind them, Subutai and his two comrades turned and rode rapidly toward the south, over the abandoned land of the Turgai.

CHAPTER FOUR



The Torguts had fled precipitately over a fifty-mile front at dusk, driving their cattle and sheep southward in haste. From the north the clouds of smoke were moving after them like a monstrous wall, relentless as fate. The land sloped to the south, and their carts plunged and careened over the dark earth, rattling, colliding, and often overturning, tumbling their contents under the hooves of frightened beasts. The animals smelled the grass-smoke; their nostrils twitched, their eyes dilated with fear. The great migration, which had seemed ended, was thus resumed. The Torgut horde rolled south in the night like surf rushing ahead of a tidal wave,—the smoke following grey and relentless as the sea, gleaming here and there with phosphorous streaks of fire.

When the moon rose, people could see that they were coming into a lower and flatter land, a country of sparse grass, less rolling, poorly watered, covered with the shrubby derisun and saxaul of the desert. Whenever the flight slowed, when carts and animals became tangled and halted ahead, people commented excitedly.

“This is worse than ever!”

“Where are we going, does anyone know?”

“Maybe you’d have preferred the fire.”

“No, but we might have tried stopping it.”

“What’s the use, the land wasn’t big enough, anyway.”

“Kirghiz are coming, too.”

“What, didn’t we lick them before?”

"And Bashkirs. Twenty thousand or more."

"Even so—what are we, women and priests?"

"No, but the best plan is to fight them on even terms. Besides, Galdan and Donderkov are coming with many men, haven't you heard?"

There were all sorts of rumours, but nearly everyone felt the need for reaching a safe place where the horde could be reorganized compactly, beyond the fire and savage pursuit, where they could wait at a distance while the warriors fought the Kirghiz and Bashkir troops. These fresh and sudden calamities, the news of Donderkov's vandalism on the Volga, the presence of Traubenberg and the Russian Army at Fort Orenberg—these things made it clear to most people that there were no alternatives. They could neither return to Russia nor could they remain in the land of the Turgai. To attempt fighting the fire, to stand without retreat against the wild attack of the Kirghiz, would be an act of foolish bravado. The enemy was not encumbered by flocks and herds, by women and children. The Torgut horde was defenceless because of its very size. But if the hoshuns and aimaks could safely retreat out of the enemy's reach, then their soldiers could properly hold off and battle the Kirghiz and Bashkir savages.

This was the plan of the Sarga, and it had been reached unanimously. . . .

When Ubasha, in the afternoon, gave Galinsky his message for Traubenberg, he had been acting on what he himself considered a forlorn hope. He offered himself as hostage for his people over the desperate protest of Bambar and Choktu, and against the votes of Chereng and Zebek. Chereng and Zebek, even then, had maintained there was no alternative but renewed flight. Bambar and Choktu, aware that Zebek's and Chereng's arguments were largely true, felt also that if Donderkov had actually pillaged the Volga region, then the Tsarina's terms of truce would be doubly oppressive to the Torgut people. Yet they reluc-

tantly agreed, under protest, to Ubasha's desperate plan. Their sole idea was to find some way in which the people, weary and harassed, might gain some measure of rest and peace. When the Russian lieutenant rode away with Subutai, the Torgut councillors felt sure that Trautenberg would never agree to such terms. But they hoped, by such means, to gain time for their people.

Later in the afternoon, a galloping troop had arrived from the Tobol, breathless with the news that Kirghiz and Bashkir armies were swarming south of the Tobol forts. Shortly after this, the main body of Temuru's men came in from the northern part of the Turgai land, riding hard, bringing with them a wounded Bashkir captive.

This fellow was brought into the presence of Ubasha Khan. He was short and swarthy, with the abnormally large head of his race, the low forehead and narrow eyes, the protruding ears, the sullen and fanatical glare of his Mohammedan people. His lung had been pierced by a lance, and he stood in the midst of the Torgut princes, in the blue pavilion on the grassy slope, with blood dripping from his chest and a red froth on his lips.

In Bashkir words, which Choktu translated, he told how the Bashkir and Kirghiz warriors had grown tired of Trautenberg's delay, and how they were coming south to annihilate the Torguts, leaving the Russian Army no course but to follow their headstrong allies.

With a torrent of Moslem curses at the strange people among whom he had been brought to die, with a red foam pouring from his parched lips, the Bashkir captive fell dead at Ubasha's feet.

The khan stepped delicately around the fallen man, and he peered far away to the north. In the twilight, people were shouting at one another, pointing to the north. The animals raised their quivering nostrils. People, without any command, were already pulling up their tent-stakes and piling things hurriedly into their carts. The khan

saw, like a thickening dusk, the great clouds of smoke beginning to roll south over the Turgai land.

When he turned, the body of the Bashkir had been removed. The princes were silent, but no words were needed now. Even Temuru, his head bent grimly, was in agreement with the others. In that moment, the khan knew that all hope of peace for his people was lost.

The Saga quickly outlined a strategy of retreat and defence. Messengers were sent to Momotubash, somewhere far in the south. Commands echoed among the hoshuns of the great horde—people were already thronging with their carts and beasts in a wild stream from the north. The horde was to proceed southward, massing against the south-eastern shores of Lake Chalkhar, where grass and water might be found. Donderkov, approaching across the Khara Kum desert, would bulwark the Torgut horde from the rear. And the soldiers, reforming in solid ranks north of the horde, would hold back the Kirghiz and Bashkirs somewhere above the Nosh Birmak and Bish Kuduk wells, where water-carts were to be filled for distant travel. . . .

Through the night, none slept.

When the moon had risen high, the horde was well south of the Turgai grasslands, which were still burning. In the desert-like new country, strange and barren in moonlight, the flight slowed. Animals halted to crop the sparse grass, although their heads still rose from time to time, sniffing the north wind. Order began to take the place of panic, and the hoshuns and aimaks reformed, moving eastward toward the shores of Lake Chalkhar. Near the lake, more grass was found. Far away in the north, the fire slowly burned itself out.

The water-carts—which none had had time to fill in the Turgai land, in their abrupt departure—now were emptied of whatever litter, utensils, household goods, dried meat, had been piled in them during the winter and early spring months of migration. These great cumbersome carts, their

round wooden sides covered with leather and oil-soaked cloth, rumbled steadily toward the wells of Nosh Birmak and Bish Kuduk, where soldiers stood in the moonlight with leather buckets, filling the carts to capacity.

"Where now, soldier?" people said.

"Who knows, neighbour? Across the desert, perhaps."

"Some say, we're going to Djungaria at last."

"That guess is as good as any. . . . Move on, man—there are people waiting."

"Is Donderkov coming?" new people said.

The soldiers shrugged.

"You know as much as we do, neighbours."

"But what of the Russians—is it true they're coming to help the Kirghiz attack?"

"If they do," said a soldier grimly, "we're ready for them, no matter what."

"Yes, go tend your animals, grandpa," said another soldier, grinning in the moonlight, "we'll keep you from harm."

As the night drew on, as the moon lowered over the western waters of Lake Chalkhar, the Torgut forces massed in a long line of defence north of the wells. Subutai, accompanied by Norbo and Tuluku, at last found the main body of his company among Temuru's men. The story of Batu and his murdered companions caused angry comments and tense scowls. All the men looked carefully to their daggers and swords, their lances, their Russian muskets. As the time of dawn drew nearer the Torguts were ready.

The Kirghiz and Bashkirs, coming south over the burnt ground, had halted at a distance, concentrating their forces on the plain between Lake Rinkul and Lake Chalkhar. Occasionally there were clashes between Kirghiz and Torgut scouts, patrolling the lands that lay between the opposing troops. But during the last hours of the night, the northern savages remained far from sight, preparing

for an attack after dawn, roused by the prospect of killing and plunder, incited by the murderous shouts of Moslem fanatics.

The Torguts, mostly, were quiet and restrained. Many of them, young men like Subutai and Norbo, had gained their first knowledge of actual warfare at Koulagina and the Mugadir pass. Waiting the Kirghiz attack, now, they were far more sober and thoughtful than in those earlier days of the migration.

Among the Torguts, war was not a principal means of livelihood, as it was among the still barbarous tribes of Bashkir and Kirghiz. The exaltation of war in itself, or as a prelude to plunder and gain was, among Torguts, considered the sign of an immature youth or of an uncivilized people who had little or nothing of their own to lose, other than their lives.

The Bashkirs and Kirghiz tribes of the Ural-Tobol region, by reason of their barbarous poverty, were ideal tools in the hands of Traubenberg and the Russian Empire. In the past, these people had revolted persistently against ill-treatment by the Tsarist officials, and had been subdued by means of troop levies from among the Torguts, who were led to believe they were acting in defence of their own wealth and culture against these poverty-stricken plunderers. But likewise these same Bashkirs and Kirghiz tribes—who were encouraged in their ignorance, poverty, and Moslem fanaticism by Tsarist rulers—were used frequently against the Torgut horde to keep the latter from growing too rich and strong.

Consequently, these savage peoples might revolt against the Tsarist regime, but they would never flee from it, having nothing to lose by remaining—but something to gain, actually. And so, infuriated by the prospect of losing forever that great reservoir of Torgut wealth which they had come to regard as their own source of plunderable sustenance, they were readily incited by Traubenberg to ply their

fanatical trade—the primary form of their savage industry, warfare—against the Torgut horde.

The Torguts, for their part, were equally ready to defend their wealth—the primary reason for their great migration from Russia. To the Torguts, the culture of flocks and herds and handicrafts had come to be considered the primary interest of man ; and any interference with these pursuits, whether by tax or law or what, had come to be considered an act in far greater violation of freedom than any personal or physical ill-treatment or oppression, generally speaking.

The Torguts, at the same time, considered war as a necessary, although subordinate, part of the social duty of man ; for as man valued the fruits of his culture, so must he maintain the conditions for that culture, and defend those conditions against all enemies. Therefore the Torguts were forced to conserve the art of war, in which they were extremely skilled—but as a means of defending, not of acquiring, wealth. On the prowess of their warriors depended the Torgut heritage, a pastoral culture slowly and painstakingly accumulated throughout the centuries.

It was this consciousness—sobering each soldier with the vision of his animals, his wife and children, his way of life, all depending on him—which filled the thought of the Torgut warriors now, before dawn, awaiting the Kirghiz attack. And all stared toward the north, grim and ready, determined to defend these things with their lives.

Shortly before dawn, when the moon had nearly set, there was a stir of activity among the front ranks of the men.

A giant-sized figure made of black felt stuffed with grass, decked with armour, was carried out on the dark plain. This figure, representing the “fiend of war” in Torgut tradition, was planted thus at a distance from the warriors.

Then a small group of lamas, clad in yellow and scarlet gowns, suddenly appeared among the men. With timorous glances toward the north, they beat drums and cymbals

and sounded deep notes on their horns, advancing toward the stuffed giant—glancing furtively in all directions for signs of Kirghiz or Bashkirs.

When the great war banner of the Torgut people appeared, unfurling the battle god, the lamas retreated with alacrity, having fulfilled their duties. And behind the war banner, a company of soldiers surged forward, attacking the fiend of war, shooting, hurling lances, toppling the giant from his feet, and finally burning him where he lay, planting the war standard through his fiery belly. Nothing was left of him but ashes, the war banner stirred in a breeze, and the first light of morning appeared.

Now a silence came over the Torgut fighters, arrayed for battle in the chill of dawn. Somewhere a bird called, clear and melancholy in the silence. And in that moment, the Kirghiz attack began.

A large troop of them appeared, swiftly riding, on the extreme eastern flank of the Torgut line. They shouted, brandishing spears and swords, then wheeled and fled. They had few guns, and they shot sparingly back over their shoulders as they rode away. The Torguts loosed a volley of musket shots, and a troop of Torgut horsemen raced after the retreating foe.

Similar attacks, seemingly pointless, occurred more and more frequently as the light grew stronger, all along the line. The strategy of the Kirghiz, it soon appeared, was to draw the Torguts in pursuit, to disrupt the battle line. The Torguts, after a short pursuit, usually returned swiftly to their places. When the Kirghiz tactic yielded no further result, they and their Bashkir allies began launching a whole series of such attacks at the same time.

In many instances, now, the offensive forces were cut off from retreat, cornered and circled among the low ridges and shallow ravines of the plain by the swifter horses of the defending troops.

As the morning drew on, the whole battle-front was

slowly involved in such manœuvres, locked in combat groups that continually shifted, split, rejoined, and dissolved into larger and larger battle-arrays, until finally there were a full forty-five thousand men fighting desperately on the Chalkhar plain.

Wherever the combat was isolated, the Torguts maintained a compact formation, out-riding their enemies in massed groups. Their horses, sturdy and fast, could double back and forth like hunting dogs. Shooting over their shoulders, hurling lances at closer range, the Torguts rode round and round their enemies.

The Kirghiz and Bashkir warriors became purple with rage, shouting Moslem invectives at their Buddhist and Shamanist foes, often dashing in with fanatical fury for close fighting, which they much preferred. And at such times, when they succeeded in joining battle hand-to-hand, they struck blindly with spear and dagger and sword at their more sober opponents.

Subutai was in the thick of several such fights. At one time, a lance grazed his cheek and he stooped and seized it, recalling his fight with Beran ; he plunged it through its owner's throat, and then wiped the blood from his stinging cheek with an involuntary movement of his hand. Another time, he closed in on a gigantic Kirghiz who, whirling a double-edged Turkish sword, was shrieking like a madman. This big fellow decapitated several of Subutai's comrades before the young Torgut could reach his side. Clutching his dagger, Subutai grappled the burly man, plunging the blade deep into the madman's back. The Kirghiz whirled, his mouth wide-open and a startled look on his face ; and before he fell from his horse, his sword came down in a final arc, slicing the toe from one of Subutai's boots. Subutai seized the bloody sword from the loose hand of his victim and began laying-about with it himself. In all this time, he kept hoping that somehow he might encounter the Kirghiz chieftain, Beran. Once

he thought he saw the arrogant savage at a distance, and he spurred toward him. But Beran, if so it had been, disappeared. And throughout the rest of the battle, whether in close or distant fighting, Subutai caught no further sight of the man whose life he once had in his hands—and which he regretted, now, having spared.

Clouds of dust rose from underfoot as grass was trampled and the earth stirred where the grass grew sparsely. The air was filled with wild shouts and frantic, dying cries of Bashkir and Kirghiz and Torgut warriors. In the south, the people of the horde watched the vast clouds of dust that drifted under the sun ; they strained their ears to seek meaning in the shouts, vague as the sounds of some distant sea ; they sniffed the traces of powder smoke borne on the drifting air. At the wells of Nosh Birmak and Bish Kuduk, the task of filling the water-carts continued, with a strong garrison of soldiers to prevent any sudden capture of the wells in case an enemy troop broke through the lines. And in the north, on the battlefield, the noise and havoc of death increased still more as noonday neared.

The Kirghiz, out-ridden and defeated in combat groups and hand-to-hand warfare, had gradually withdrawn, all along the line. And nearly at noon, they launched a desperate frontal attack on the Torgut troops.

The Torguts immediately fell into the order of mass fighting.

The musketeers, passing their horses to the rear, dropped to their stomachs, lying behind ridges wherever possible. Behind them crouched the archers, who had fought only sporadically until now, fitting their two-foot arrows to their long bows, aiming over the heads of the musketeers. Behind them, the lancers and swordsmen, massed on horseback, waited the attack.

When the Kirghiz and Bashkir troops, desperate with defeat and wild with rage, plunged toward the Torgut line, the musketeers loosed a murderous volley, stemming the

attack ; the archers twanged their bows, striking horses and men with their mighty shafts ; and through the two front ranks of defence, galloping swiftly through gaps purposefully left in the line of archers and musketeers, the Torgut horsemen dashed out toward their wavering foes, hurling their lances and whirling their swords.

The Kirghiz line broke—they and the Bashkirs fled in a wild retreat. The trampled earth was strewn with dead horses, men fallen on both sides in the morning battles. Horses stumbled and pitched their riders headlong. The Kirghiz chieftains tried to rally their men. But the Torgut horsemen, sweeping out in a long line of victory, could no longer be stemmed.

Far over the dusty, bloody plain the Torguts pursued their defeated enemies. In the north, the grasslands of the Turgai country were barren and black under the noonday sun, no longer smoking. Northward the Kirghiz and Bashkirs fled, and the victorious Torguts only stayed their grim pursuit on the burnt lands of the Turgai, north of the waters of Lake Rinkul, above the blue and peaceful waters of Lake Chalkhar. . . .

The army of the Russians had never appeared. Nor had the people of Galdan and Donderkov come from the south of Chalkhar. Five thousand Kirghiz and Bashkirs lay dead on the Chalkhar plain ; dust drifted slowly, blood dried in the sun ; four thousand Torguts lay on the trampled land. But to the wells of Nosh Birmak and Bish Kuduk the water-carts still came, filling patiently for a migration across unknown desert lands where the Torguts were now bound.

CHAPTER FIVE



On the morning of April 28, 1771, the Torguts moved from the shores of Lake Chalkhar toward the south-east, in the direction of Aris Kum, the yellow desert.

Grass was sparse, the days became dry and warm. The ewes, who had begun to lamb unsatisfactorily, continued to fail ; and the cattle, whose calving season soon came, fared little better than the sheep. It was a poor spring.

Everyone recalled the spring migration of previous years, from the Volga to the summer pastures near Lake Bish-Uba, the deep lush grass and the blue water, the rolling green hills and the white clouds, the enrichment by calves and lambs, the brilliant colour of wild flowers on the grassy steppe, the joy of spring in former years. . . . They thought sadly, too, of the fine pasture-lands of the Turgai, now black and abandoned to vultures and Kirghiz destroyers.

But it was spring none the less. For nearly two weeks a gentle wind blew from the north-eastern hills with a sweet, fresh scent ; the clumps of grass were still green. People smiled and laughed a little, at night they sang of marriage and joy ; they changed to their summer garments and trousers of bright blue and grey. In the sparse grass bloomed tulips and camel-thorns, overhead flew white terns and eagles and kites, the spring wind blew gently.

Once more hope spread through the Torgut horde, like the illusory spring on the desert, the flowers of May, the quiet sunsets behind them in the west, the serene morning

light in the east. The Kirghiz and Bashkirs had disappeared ; danger from the savage warriors seemed over at last. Despite the Torgut victory on the Chalkhar plain, the people felt none of the wild and war-like joy which had marked their victory in the Mugadir pass. They had suffered too much, their own losses had been too great, their future was still too obscure ; they accepted their victory quietly, giving deep-felt thanks to the weary troops, grateful to their Shaminist and Buddhist gods for what seemed final escape from the Russ and the northern savages. Travelling toward the south-east, thoughts of their ancient land—Djungaria, somewhere far over the eastern deserts—now in these illusory days of spring filled the Torgut horde with a quiet hope and confidence.

The decision to seek the Torgut homeland in the Tian Shan Mountains of China had been unanimously reached by the Torgut Council. Where else could they go, where else could they live in peace ? . . . Rabdan, the nephew of Choktu, spoke confidently. Djungaria was the home of Torgut freedom, he said, and Djungaria would again be peopled by Torguts. Momotubash, who had been wounded at Chalkhar, smiled grimly at the younger man.

"And what if the Chinese think otherwise ?" he said.

"It's our land," Rabdan said, flushing, "good land, more than enough, worth fighting for."

"Yes," said Ubasha, "far better to fight for such land, if need be, than for burnt lands not large enough."

"Or we might make good terms with the Chinese Khan," Chereng suggested, "better than with the Tsarina, isn't it so ?"

"Just so they be terms of freedom !" said Rabdan, flushing again.

"Rabdan speaks well," said Choktu.

"All things may happen," murmured Zebek, "Djungaria is still far way. When we come there, we can see."

"Now that you're having your way at last," Temuru growled at Zebek, "you're mild as a lark."

Ubasha looked around, anxiously.

"Then we're all agreed?"

"God's will," said the Lama Loosang with a pious sigh.

And when the decision of the Sarga had been announced, on the shores of Lake Chalkhar, all the people of the horde had sighed deeply, too, thinking of the vast deserts and lands they must still travel. But there were few complaints; all felt they were setting toward their true goal at last. And as the migration got under way again, people thought of the fabulous mountains of the Tian Shan—of Khan Tengri with his sparkling summit of ice and snow, the high valleys and deep grass of Yulduz Plateau, the sweet cool water of the River Ili, their legendary homeland, Djungaria. Like a bright mirage now seen in the clear spring air, these thoughts led the Torguts with new hope into the waste-lands of Aris Kum.

The fine spring weather remained for nearly two weeks, yet travel was slow.

The oxen and cattle plodded, hauling the great carts more heavily laden than before, since the water-carts were now filled with water and since many carts had been lost in flight from the Kirghiz and the burning lands of the Turgai. And the sheep and cattle, pausing to labour, were weak and slow. At night the animals cropped the sparse grass, water was portioned among the herds and flocks. Yet more and more lambs were still-born, most of the lambs and calves were sickly, the mothers required care and rest.

Even among the people, it was noted, children were born poorly, some dead or deformed, and the mothers laboured more weakly and longer than usual. The people of the horde, thus far, had had sufficient food and drink; so that many blamed trouble on the hardship of migration and the lack of rest; but some said it was the black magic of Russ and Kirghiz, pursuing them thus with a poor

year and poor labour for women and ewes and cattle alike.

These difficulties further slowed the travel of the horde ; people and animals moved at a more halting, reluctant pace. The carts creaked in the dryer heat of the sun, the wheels sank more deeply in the sandy earth. Even the horses were less eager, as the horde moved deeper into the desert of Aris Kum. Only the dogs, yelping and running among carts and animals, their tongues hanging out, their bellies close to the ground, ran eagerly here and there, seeking food or drink. The horde, the animals, even though the fine weather continued, moved more and more slowly, reluctantly, toward the heart of the Yellow Desert.

By the fourteenth day from Chalkhar, a day when the wind suddenly veered to the south and began to blow strong and hot, the Torguts had travelled little more than one hundred and fifty miles from the Turgai lands.

On that day, May 13, a curious incident of the hunt occurred among the pale reeds of the Yellow Lake, a salt marsh called Aris Kul, on the northern part of the desert.

Khoochin, who had refused to go with his daughter Ghashun to Zebek's ulus, was accompanying Subutai and a large troop of scouts. He and a few other old men, with berkuts and hunting dogs, had been travelling with the troops in hope of game.

No game was sighted, not many birds were seen. Sand-grouse and grey partridge rose from clumps of grass and saxaul long before dogs or horsemen approached. Even in the twilight, only a few jumping-rats had been seen, skipping over the shadowy sand.

After dark, it had seemed cool enough for a fire, these nights. The troops, gathering large bundles of the brittle and leafless saxaul, sat on the cool sand close to the bright flame. The saxaul, a small desert tree that grew knee-high, burned fiercely. The troops talked of Djungaria, of the battle of Chalkhar, of many things. Sometimes a

man would begin a ballad, looking around. And then all would be quiet a while, thinking of Batu, the dead ballad-singer, the dead teller of tales. Grim eyes kept watch on the dark and silent desert all night. But no Kirghiz or Bashkir riders appeared.

As the troops moved on, each day, the birds became fewer, nothing but lizards and snakes were seen. The dogs were hungry and restless, the great hooded berkut on Khoochin's wrist clawed impatiently. The old men swung their hunting clubs, made of heavy wood with iron lumps embedded in their thickened ends, muttering at the calm desert sky.

On May 13, when the wind changed, they were approaching the salt marsh of Aris Kul. Khoochin shaded his eyes with his left hand, peering over the yellow sand where a little green grass and a few spring flowers still grew. On the wrist of his right hand, propped on a berkut crutch, the hooded bird moved his great claws. Khoochin sighed.

"It's a dry year, a bad year," he said at last.

"Why so, uncle?" said Subutai.

Khoochin pointed with his gnarled and wrinkled hand toward the sky over Aris Kul. His hand quivered as he said :

"Over yonder marsh, there is nothing but haze. There must be little water, the marsh seems dry."

In the distance, the pale reeds of the Yellow Lake gleamed in the sunlight, beginning to bend under the hot wind from the south. Over the marsh hung a dull haze. Far to the south, a great dust cloud hovered for miles over the plodding horde. The dogs ran far ahead, close to the ground, famished and restless in the hot sun. The whole horizon seemed circled by the same haze as that which hung over the salt marsh, a ring of low summer clouds.

The soldiers and the old men spurred their horses forward. The dogs had begun to yelp in the distance; among the salt-crusted reeds they had found game of some sort.

An animal streaked from a marshy lair, doubled back, and began to run at right angles to the troop. Khoochin swiftly raised his wrist in the air and slipped the hood from his berkut.

The great bird rose with a few powerful wing beats, hovering to spot his prey ; then he dipped, suddenly tipping his glossy body, diving after the frightened beast.

An exclamation of disappointment burst from the men.

" Wild dogs ! " they muttered in disgust.

But Khoochin, shading his eyes from the sun, had a technical interest in the hunt. His eyes became brighter, his hand trembled, watching the berkut dive at the running dog, sinking his talons cruelly in the animal's back, driving his beak surely and deeply into the base of the poor beast's skull.

" Ah ! " Khoochin murmured ecstatically. " Well done, berkut ! "

But in the lair of the reeds, the hunting dogs had surrounded the rest of their prey. The other old men, swinging their clubs, crashing through the brittle reeds, flinging their clubs at the cornered wild dogs, closed in.

The troop, the younger men, lost interest.

Khoochin, slipping the hood over his berkut again, rode with Subutai to the edge of the marsh.

There were a few brackish pools among the reeds, crystals of salt glittered when the hot wind stirred the water and marsh grass.

The old men, shouting and flinging their clubs at the wild dogs, seemed to have forgotten that such miserable beasts were not fit objects for man to hunt. And the dogs, slaving and yelping madly, snapped at the hind-quarters of their savage brothers. When the wild dogs were felled one by one, before their flesh ceased quivering, the hunting dogs snarled and tore them ravenously apart. The dogs mutilated their fellows like madmen, the old men shouted like animals at the ferocity of the kill.

The brackish pools filled with the colour of dull red blood, the pale reeds swayed in the hot wind.

Khoochin shuddered.

"When dog eats dog," he said, "then let men beware."

Subutai had as little taste for the sight as old Khoochin. But he said, with a grim smile :

"Khoochin, you're getting soft. What are you, a sheep?"

"No," said Khoochin, raising his eyes and looking far off to the hazy horizon. "But men are no better than dogs, when dry days come."

On the southern horizon, throughout the afternoon, the nebulous clouds mounted. Clouds, and the sand and dust raised by the feet of the mighty horde, overcast the twilight sky.

Still no rain came, that night or later.

In the dark, a dry hot wind blew strongly from the south. Above the horizon, among the massed and distant clouds heat lightning flared.

That night Ubasha sent a messenger to the distant south flank of the horde, calling Zebek to his tent. The khan sat alone, waiting. On his low table stood a silver bowl of oil with a floating wick. The dark blue cloth of the tent shook, overhead; the wind blew under the walls which were partly raised. The wick drifted about in the bowl, flickering with the night wind, somewhat like the distant lightning which played fitfully on the horizon that circled the horde. Insects had been drawn by the light, many had singed their wings and fallen into the silver bowl. On the gleaming surface of oil, the insects struggled to escape the flame. But the wick drifted this way and that, wherever the insects fled, like a baleful god of destruction. For a long time the khan watched the tiny insects, drowning and dying in their frantic struggle, fascinated by the sight. Then he raised his head suddenly and called for a new bowl.

It was Michailov, the Russian hostage, who answered.

"Oh," said Ubasha.—"A fresh bowl, if you please, lieutenant," he said in Russian, "the insects spoil the clarity of our light."

When Michailov returned, the khan, having lit his pipe at the fitful flame, snuffed out the wick and said, meditatively :

"What do you think, Michailov—will Traubenberg and the Russians still come?"

Michailov hesitated only a moment before he said :

"I think not, Excellency. It's too far—the deserts are terribly hot in summer."

"Ah!" murmured Ubasha, puffing his pipe. "Perhaps the battle at Lake Chalkhar makes a difference, too. Even the Kirghiz have disappeared."

"Kirghiz and Bashkirs are different," said Michailov, "they're used to the desert, Excellency—heat seems to delight them."

Ubasha reflected a moment and then he said :

"Ah well, lieutenant! but a people like ours, with a clear goal, glowing with a just cause—let them follow us if they will, they'll only destroy themselves."

"Perhaps, who can say?" said Michailov, carrying away the silver bowl in which the charred wick floated like a large dead bug among the insects. When he rejoined his two Cossacks, he gestured toward the khan's blue tent and muttered, "He's a peculiar fellow, comrades—the desert burns in the summer, but he thinks the white sun is a torch of justice for his own people."

The Cossacks nodded morosely.

They and Michailov, aware that each day they were more distant than ever from help, had been growing extremely restless. Several times—once in the Turgai country, when they heard that Traubenberg was near—the Cossacks had talked of escape. But Michailov, recalling their oath to Sand-chab, had reluctantly opposed such an

idea. Besides, he had pointed out, they were far safer with Ubasha than with Kirghiz fanatics into whose hands they might fall. The three of them, treated with civility by the khan, had come to consider Ubasha their best guarantee of eventual freedom. They remained as close to his presence as possible, serving him when occasion arose, often at night forming a sort of inner-guard between his tent and the sentries. But the deeper the Torgut horde penetrated the desert of Aris Kum, the more unhappy and restless the Cossacks became ; when there was talk of escape now, even Michailov joined the discussion.

Thus they sat in the dark near the khan's tent, conversing in whispers, when Zebek arrived.

The prince was whistling as he rode up. He became silent, staring at the Cossacks as he dismounted. Then he tossed his reins toward Michailov and went into the tent.

Ubasha rose, smiling to conceal his nervousness ; he clapped his hands briskly.

"Lieutenant," he called loudly in Russian, "tobacco and arrack, if you please !"

Zebek arched his eyebrows.

"It was good of you to come, cousin," said Ubasha.

Zebek jerked his head, as Michailov entered the tent ; and he said in Russian :

"One thing I can't understand, cousin—why you permit these Cossack rascals to lurk near your tent in the dark."

Ubasha laughed nervously.

"Why, they're good fellows," he said, "they're unarmed, they won't run away. Besides, even if it goes against them," Ubasha said, looking sharply at Zebek, "they speak the truth. Traubenbergs will remain on the Tobol."

Zebek lowered his eyes, sipping the arrack.

"The truth is often dangerous," he murmured.

Michailov flushed, he scowled at Zebek, withdrawing from the tent angrily. When he was gone, Zebek lifted his

eyes a little and peered cautiously across the low table at the khan.

"What do you want of me, cousin?" he said softly.

The hot wind blew from the desert; heat lightning played on the far horizon; the wick flared in the silver bowl.

Ubasha wet his lips and said:

"Galdan and Donderkov, cousin—they never came."

Zebek drained his cup, he reached for more arrack, masking his eyes.

"Perhaps they were cut off by Kara-Kalpaks, by Kirghiz," he said.

"Our scouts travelled far into the Khara Kum desert, cousin, south of the lake, west of Chalkhar. They found no sign."

Zebek's hand twitched.

"Perhaps Donderkov never left the Volga—perhaps the messengers were misinformed."

"Exactly," said Ubasha brittlely, "the messengers failed to tell the truth."

"Ah!" said Zebek, flushing and pouring more arrack into his cup.

"But now they have told the truth," the khan said abruptly.

Zebek drank slowly.

"The truth," he said, "is only a manner of speaking."

Ubasha wet his lips again. He leaned across the table and suddenly whispered:

"The truth is, Zebek—you sent those messengers."

Insects flew blindly at the light, they struggled in the burning oil.

"Perhaps I did," Zebek said at last, lifting his eyes.

"But what of it?—it was justified."

"It is never justified, Zebek, to move a people by trickery. Maybe without your lies, even so, our people would have come where they are now—maybe we would go to our ancient

land, Djungaria," Ubasha said slowly. "But truth, cousin, is the only right way to move a people."

Zebek laughed scornfully, gulping his arrack.

"If you believe such nonsense," he said, "why bother me with it?"

"Because," Ubasha said, impetuously, "it would be worse for our people to learn that a great-grandson of the Khan Ayouka is a man of vicious lies and cowardly deceit."

Zebek drummed angrily on the table, saying :

"I suppose you're such a fine and noble fellow, little Ubasha——"

"I make no claims," Ubasha retorted, "but at least I try to think of the good of all our people, I try to be honest—to speak the truth——"

"Listen," said Zebek, glaring at his cousin. "Do you call it honest to raise the kalim for Cedar-chab?"

"We're not talking of her."

"Just the same," shouted Zebek, seeming drunk and angry, "we're talking of her, it was a crooked thing!"

"Quiet, for God's sake, Zebek," said Ubasha, glancing toward the dark tent near-by where his wife was sleeping. "You'll wake Mandere and the child, he's not been sleeping well——"

"I don't give a damn," cried Zebek, louder than ever, "wake him and tell him his father's a cheat, an impostor, a dull-witted fool, with neither the right nor the guts to be khan——"

"Silence!" shouted Ubasha, rising and crouching, glaring at his cousin. "You've lost your head!"

"Not to you, I haven't," snarled Zebek, trying to rise. "Why in hell do I bother being polite—Cedar-chab, kalim, all sorts of roundabout schemes——"

"Take your hand off that knife," the khan warned, "I'll call the guard!"

Zebek fumbled with his Persian dagger, lurching drunkenly.

"You're afraid to fight," he muttered.

"Death solves nothing," said Ubasha. "And no matter what—if harm comes to me, the Prince Choktu shall guard my son—and he shall be khan, Zebek, if the people so will."

"If the people will!" sneered Zebek.

"Yes, and God's will, too," said the khan.

Zebek suddenly straightened, with what dignity he could, looking behind Ubasha. He placed the dagger back in his belt and lowered his eyes, muttering:

"Very well, cousin. Carry the truth like a torch—see how well you can lead the horde——"

He lurched from the tent.

The khan felt a cool hand on his brow. He sank back trembling, looking at the heat lightning flashing in the distant south, feeling the hot wind.

"It was the heat, the tension," he muttered, "we lost our heads."

"Now you've made Zebek an open enemy," said Cedar-chab.

"It's best so, perhaps—he lied, he sent false messengers," Ubasha said irritably.

"But think you, this ends such deeds?" She came around and crouched at her brother's side, whispering, "I saw the knife."

"Why," said Ubasha, trying to smile, "why, sister—such men as Zebek will only act when their deeds can be unknown. Why, look you—I made him drunk on purpose to learn his mind."

He looked sidewise at Cedar-chab, as though expecting a compliment on his strategy. But she only shook her head sadly and said:

"Perhaps. But Zebek is more clever than you, brother, he has no scruples—whereas you pretend to have a few, at least. Perhaps he seemed drunk on purpose—perhaps he learned more from you than otherwise."

Ubasha started at his sister a moment, nervously ; and then his hand shot out and he seized her wrist. His eyes glittered fiercely, his hand gripped her arm tightly.

"How much did you hear?" he whispered.

She showed no pain, she stared unfalteringly at his gleaming eyes.

"Enough to know you bargained me—that you bargained to gain some end of your own——"

"That was before," Ubasha muttered, still holding her wrist, "in the Turgai land, before my son was born—to gain time——"

"I'll never be bargained to Zebek," Cedar-chab said quietly but firmly, "not so I live."

The khan's clutch tightened on his sister's wrist. How little a woman understands, he thought, what could she be thinking? He said harshly :

"What makes you say that?"

"Because so I feel," said Cedar-chab, "and so I've sworn."

"To whom, on the Holy Bichik?" the khan demanded. She lowered her eyes. He twisted her wrist sharply and said, "To whom, I demand on penalty?"

"To Subutai," she faltered.

Slowly the khan released her hand. She remained motionless, at last raising her eyes to see her brother's face. He sat thinking for a long time, his face turned inscrutably toward the far horizon where lightning flashed like flame blowing above the dark and distantly spread masses of the Torgut horde. Then he said slowly, without turning his head :

"People like us cannot do with their lives what they will, Cedar-chab. The lives of our people come first."

"But, brother," she said less falteringly, "Subutai and I are part of our people, isn't it so?"

The khan sighed and said patiently :

"It's different. Subutai is a good man, a brave fighter like his father Temuru, although poor—but I have nothing

against him. As for Zebek, I dislike and distrust him. Yet it may so be, in time to come we must betroth you to Zebek, for the good of our people."

"The good of the people!" Cedar-chab burst out angrily. "Who decides that, you and Zebek?"

"The power of Zebek is bad, it must be controlled one way or another."

"That's it! It's your own power or his, not the good of the people——"

"Mine is the people's power, their good," Ubasha said sharply.

"Their good!" said Cedar-chab. "Perhaps their good lay in spite of all by the Volga—or perhaps it lay in Djungaria from the very start. Why did you lead our people to the north, far out of our path to the Turgai lands, near the Kirghiz, the Tobol forts? You knew these things, just as Zebek knew. I've seen maps, brother, I've thought about this. Perhaps your way is the right one, brother, the only path. But you took it, not for the people, but for your own gain—to keep your power. And all the while, Zebek cleverly sat back, because you were doing just as he wished, do you hear?" Cedar-chab said, breathless and flushed, clenching her small fists. "Don't talk to me about good of the people," she said angrily. "You're as guilty as Zebek—as unscrupulous at heart——"

"Yes," muttered Ubasha, staring fixedly over the dark miles of Torgut camps toward the circling fire of lightning. "Yes, nothing shall stop me, now that we're on the path to Djungaria. I shall lead, not Zebek. But it is good, for I'll lead our people to their ancient land—to reconquer it—to bring peace and freedom for our people again. This I shall do, and it is good—and so shall it be written in the books of history!"

She looked at his face, set fanatically toward the dark horizon where hot wind blew and lightning flared. And she whispered strangely :

"You're mad, brother—you'll lead us to death—you're mad as Zebek !"

But Ubasha said impatiently, without turning his head :
"Go away, woman—you understand nothing."

Cedar-chab stared at her brother a moment longer, thinking to say something more, pitying his child-like hope of fame, so revealing, so frightening, his blind faith that his vacillating nature could suddenly harden, that he could lead their people, that the good of their people lay over the terrible deserts of Asia. But she could express none of these feelings, these thoughts, and he remained motionless as a man wrapped in a mighty vision. . . . And then she saw a tear fall from his eyes into the silver bowl, into the burning oil. Her own eyes misted, suddenly ; she seemed to understand him a little more. But she was helpless, she touched him tenderly with her hand, but he sat tense and silent, and she withdrew. And when she was gone, then Ubasha lowered his eyes and stared for a long time at the silver bowl, dropping tears where the insects were struggling and dying again in the hot and relentless light. . . .

In the morning the horde rolled on, deeper into the desert of Aris Kum. Before noon the heat became unbearable. The dry hot wind came steadily from the south ; sand blew, scorching the grass and covering all with dust. People choked on the hot and dusty wind. Some of the old people collapsed, many of the weaker animals fell and died. Before the middle of the afternoon, sheep and cattle lay down on the sand, trying to shelter their heads in the mournful shadow of the dwarf saxaul trees. Only the oxen plodded on, their tongues pale and dry, hauling the overladen carts. People tried to stir the stubborn animals ; a little water was doled out. But it was no use ; even the people, even the oxen and horses, soon ceased to move. . . . A belated order was given, then, to halt.

Ubasha, after signalling a halt, suggested that it might be well to travel by night, while the hot wind persisted. The

princes and leaders were questioned by messengers ; all agreed. Even Zebek sent back a strange message, saying, "Let the khan lead while he best can, day or night." Ubasha waited until dark—until the people and animals were rested, until the sand cooled—before ordering a start.

Travel by night was better, although the hot wind continued to blow for several weeks, all day and night. During the day, the people slept fitfully under their carts, under their black tents ; the animals lay panting in the sun, trying to shade their heads under the saxaul trees. At night the air seemed fresher, overhead the stars seemed soft and cool.

But suddenly the Kirghiz reappeared, taking advantage of the night. It was more difficult to guard the horde, moving over the desert in the dark, than during travel by day. A large band of Kirghiz swept down on a straggling and unguarded aimak of the northern flank, killing and plundering much in the darkness and confusion before troops could arrive.

News of the attack swept through the horde, clamouring and shouting on the sands of Aris Kum, in the dark and starlight.

"The Kirghiz again !"

"What, how do you know ?"

"Odko's aimak, in the north——"

"They killed everybody, before troops could come——"

"A thousand animals, too !"

"Five thousand, I hear, I've just come from that way——"

"Now what will we do ?"

But travel by day was impossible, even though the wind had ceased blowing hot and strong from the south. The sun rose higher and fiercer each day, the heat was stifling. Lizards and snakes crawled in the sand, overhead nothing but vultures flew. It was only at night that man and animal could move.

The Kirghiz and Bashkirs, having suffered a terrible

defeat at Chalkhar in spite of their own ferocious toll, having rested and refreshed themselves by the waters of Lake Rinkul, had since then swept north of the marsh of Aris Kul, south toward the eastern desert of Aris Kum, pursuing their former conquerors. They had lurked on the the brackish northern shores of Aris Kul, among the pale salt-crusted reeds, waiting their prey. When they attacked now, it was not in force—as at Chalkhar, when they had hoped to find an enemy demoralized by the great fire they had launched in the Turgai land—but rather, in accordance with their traditional tactics, in compact and furtive guerrilla bands. During the day they fled far from where the horde, panting in the hot sun, watchful in the strong light, was camped on the stifling desert. After dark, in more than a hundred bands of fighters, like swarms of persistent and stinging insects of the night, they swept in close pursuit of the Torguts again. The Torgut troops dashed back and forth along the flanks of the horde, harassed by an enemy they hardly ever could see. For the Kirghiz and Bashkirs, with diabolical precision, took their nightly toll of lives and plunder swiftly where people and animals were unguarded, fleeing into the shadows again before the Torgut fighters arrived.

People muttered, some began blaming the princes and leaders—some even blamed the khan. They began to mutter about the water, too. The marshes of Aris Kul, where all had thought to find water and perhaps wells, were nothing but brackish pools of salt. Clouds hung persistently in the southern sky, but no rain fell. The heat increased, the water-carts no longer rumbled heavily over the sand. Double and triple layers of felt were placed atop the carts, to lessen evaporation. The water was rationed in diminishing portions. Animals became more slow and stubborn, many died. And people became ill-tempered, muttering about the heat and the Kirghiz and the lack of water and where their leaders were taking them.

The irritation, the temper and strangeness that had come upon Zebek and Ubasha one night long since—when the dry, hot wind and the restless flares had first come over the desert—now had spread and deepened among the Torgut horde.

“Where are they taking us, those fine princes in their silk clothes?” people asked bitterly. “There’s no lack of water for them, you can bet.”

Rumours spread from Zebek’s ulus that he had always opposed the crossing of Aris Kum, that it was the khan’s fault.

“He wouldn’t listen to reason,” Zebek was reported to have said angrily. “My plan was to travel in the south, where there’s water and rain. The khan had his own way. Let the khan provide water, then.”

People murmured, saying :

“But Ubasha is a good khan, could such a thing be?”

Others spoke more bluntly.

“Whoever’s at fault, they’d better do something soon,” they said.

Ubasha grew thin and gaunt, like the harassed troops. He wet his lips and said :

“Give all my water to the people, so they see I fare no better than they. Soon we will reach the wells, the river of Sary Su, the Kara Kingir. Soon there will be water for all.”

When word spread among the people of Ubasha’s deeds and words, hope reappeared. They had been travelling five weeks on the desert of Aris Kum ; the River Sary Su was said to be only a few days away to the east. In spite of the heat, stifling even at night under the dusty stars, the horde pressed forward with new vigour. The Kirghiz and Bashkirs made their fierce and sudden attacks each night, the days were dry and sleepless. But the Torguts hastened toward the east, their parched faces eagerly fixed for sight of the wells and river ahead.

On June 5, in the south, Zebek and a troop of soldiers

surprised a small band of Kirghiz at the wells of Kizil Jingil. Some of the Kirghiz escaped, some were killed, a few were taken prisoner. They were Kirghiz of the Middle Horde ; the prisoners expressed surprised that the Torgut troop attacked them without warning. Their khan Erali was somewhere east, they said. They protested that, unlike the Little Horde of Nurali, they were not at war with the Torgut people. They begged Zebek's compassion—and he granted their plea, ordering them to be held as his personal prisoners.

But the wells of Kizil Jingil were found to be poisoned.

And when the horde, swarming from the desert, reached the Kara Kingir, the dark bank of the Sary Su, they found that the waters here, too, were low and brackish, a bare trickle of water, stagnant pools, a mocking reflection, in the impassive starlight, of the mirage their hopes had raised.

CHAPTER SIX



In the region of the Sary Su the Torgut horde, too exhausted to move elsewhere, lingered for several days.

The hoshuns were spread out north and south along the river for a distance of one hundred crowded miles, trying to get as close to what water flowed as possible. Most of the Torguts remained on the west bank of the river ; on the eastern bank, where there were low hills and deep ravines, Ubasha Khan and some animals of his ulus were encamped. Along the banks of the Sary Su, people and beasts crowded down into the stagnant river-bottom.

The desperate animals wallowed in the shallow pools ; they rolled and lay in the black mud of the Kara Kingir River, called also the Sary Su.

A few unpoisoned wells were found, small and brackish ; from these, and from what water flowed in the river, the Torguts tried to fill their carts. The people moved lethargically, trudging with leather buckets from well and stream to their carts ; yet after three days of labour, the water tanks were less than a third filled.

Men muttered, shaking their burned fists at the sun, the dry sky, the hot deserts that stretched toward the horizon on both sides of the river. The undertone of anger against their leaders grew louder ; people felt they had been betrayed by the princes and generals. But there was nothing they could do, nowhere they could go. Behind them lay the desert of Aris Kum, which they had just crossed. And eastward from the Sary Su stretched the terrible Hunger Steppe, the Bak-pak Dala.

Here on the banks of the shallow river they were no longer harassed by the Kirghiz and Bashkirs ; a few shadowy willows grew in the black clay, small stretches of pasture grass lay near the river. Here the Torguts remained four days, hoping for rain, resting as best they could, too hopeless and weary to move.

On the night of the third day, Subutai quartered his men on the east bank of the river. They had just returned from a distant scouting expedition into the Bak-pak Dala, the Hunger Steppe. They had found little grass, but they had encountered no Kirghiz warriors. And farther east than they had gone, they had seen a small encampment of herds-men—probably Kirghiz of the Middle Horde—in the midst of a few distant trees. It appeared that there must be wells, oases, in the great eastern desert. . . . The scouts, reaching the river bank, stretched out on the ground to wait for meat and drink to be brought. Subutai rode off to seek Ubasha and make his report.

He found the khan's camp near-by, situated at the head of a ravine. The ravine led, deep and dark, down toward the Sary Su. In the dusk, Subutai brushed against one of the sentries.

"What's the news?" said the sentry.

"Water," Subutai said. "There are wells in the east."

"There'd better be," said the sentry ; he pointed to the dark and cloudless sky, saying, "It doesn't look like any up there."

Subutai passed Michailov and the Cossacks, who were conversing near the khan's tent, and then he leaped down from his white Bar-kul mare.

Temuru and Momotubash were with the khan.

Momotubash smiled in greeting. Temuru growled proudly at his son :

"Well, soldier, I see they're keeping you busy."

Ubasha rose and led Subutai aside, placing a hand on his shoulder. He listened to a report of the eastern desert, the

wells, with a vague smile. When Subutai had finished, the khan stared at him strangely, wetting his lips several times, as though he had led him aside to say something in private to the young warrior. But then Ubasha turned abruptly and went back to his tent.

Subutai returned to his men, weary and unhappy.

He had hoped for sight of Cedar-chab, at the very least. For days, for weeks, he had been endlessly riding the desert lands, patrolling the borders of the horde, pursuing the elusive Kirghiz bands. He had enjoyed little rest, he had quenched his thirst rarely, he had eaten sparingly. All through the long and treacherous crossing of Aris Kum he had thought endlessly of Cedar-chab—of her smile, the distant wave of her hand in the dusk, in the land of the Turgai, near the bubbling spring. Haggard and weary, the memory of her pale face, her melancholy sweet words, these things had sustained his spirit, hoping to see her soon. But his interview with Ubasha had passed, and Cedar-chab had failed to appear.

He threw himself on the ground, among his men, morose and disinterested in the arrack and dried meat that had been brought from Ubasha's camp.

"What's wrong with Subutai?" somebody said.

Norbo winked at the men, chewing a great hunk of meat.

"He's in love," he said, with his mouth full.

"He'd better be," said Tuluku the Buddhist, darkly, pointing to the sky. "There's little or none for man, it seems, up there."

Norbo spat and took a long drink of arrack.

"Listen," he said to Tuluku. "Be a man—take things as they come. . . . You think anybody up there gives a damn about us?"

Subutai scowled.

But as dusk gave way to night, the sky darkened. The air became sultry, clouds overcast the stars. All eyes turned upward. No rain fell, although clouds hung heavily over-

head. The air was stifling, and on the horizon faint flares of lightning flashed.

Two riders came from the south, seeking Subutai.

They were Merghen, the herdsman of Gedesu, and Lev Zolotsky, the slave of Zebek. They dismounted, greeting Subutai and the men.

Lev sat gingerly on the ground, he smiled nervously at Subutai from time to time. Merghen had brought a message from Gedesu.

"He wants to know," the herdsman said, "how are your animals doing?"

"What's it to him?" Subutai said gruffly.

"Perhaps he's sorry, he left you the worst of the lot."

"That he did!" Subutai said vehemently. "And less than a third, too."

"Well, and how are they?" Merghen persisted.

"Ask Yelden," Subutai growled. "Most are dead, I hear."

"Ah, that's too bad!"

Norbo belched and said:

"What's the difference—we'll all be dead, in a little."

Lev Zolotsky looked up, he cracked his finger-joints nervously.

"Great herdsman," he mumbled to Merghen in a pre-occupied way, "don't forget the bargain."

"Yes, that's so," Merghen said uncomfortably.

"What bargain?" said Subutai.

"Well, the truth is," Merghen blurted out, "you remember Korlok?"

"Korlok? What's he got to do with it?"

"Korlok and others," said Merghen, "I just mention Korlok because he came for his meat."

"I don't understand."

"What, don't you remember? . . . Gedesu bought their carts in return for meat."

"Yes, I recall it."

"But the meat went with the carts, some of the men went with Gedesu. Korlok was one who refused to go."

"I don't blame him."

"Neither do I. But now Korlok is starving—he has no animals left, nothing to eat."

"That's bad," Subutai said, "he has a large family, too."

"Yes, but Gedesu said to Korlok, 'Take your filthy meat.' And the poor fellow couldn't carry it here on his back—fifty sheep!"

"What!"

"Yes, I said it was a crime, too!" Merghen said angrily.

"Well," said Subutai, "but what's this got to do with me?"

"I'll tell you what it is, Subutai," Merghen said desperately, "Gedesu wants you to give Korlok fifty of your sheep and he'll pay you back later."

Subutai scowled angrily.

"Korlok can have fifty of my sheep, if I have that many," he growled. "But I'll lend to Korlok—not to Gedesu!"

"By God, I'd do the same!" cried Merghen. "But look, Subutai—Korlok can never return——"

"I'll take the chance," Subutai said shortly. "I'd rather have no sheep from Korlok, than a hundred from Gedesu."

"Bravo!" said Norbo, who had been listening intently. "And how is the fat man and his skinny wife these days, anyway?"

"Why, I'll tell you, boys," said Merghen. "He's not too happy. He's lost plenty, take my word, and Zebek has milked him like a cow. You ought to hear Ghashun on the subject! But Zebek knows how to flatter the fool, it's funny. The only thing I don't like about it—the richer Zebek gets——"

At this point Lev, who had been fidgeting and preoccupied all the time Merghen and Subutai were talking, now drew Subutai aside. He tipped back his head and peered along the sides of his great nose intently.

"Brave captain," he whispered, "can you be trusted?" Subutai made a gesture.

"I mean," Lev said, "never to tell who told you?"

Something, perhaps the sultry air, the lightning on the dark horizon, perhaps Lev's unnatural excitement, made Subutai suddenly tense.

"Told you what?" he said sharply.

Lev leaned close to Subutai's ear and whispered:

"I think Zebek plans to kill the khan."

Subutai seized him by the collar.

"Who sent you here?" he said.

Lev squirmed.

"Great captain, I came here myself," he said desperately, "I came to an honest man. If I were a dishonest man myself, surely I'd go somewhere to sell what I know——"

"What do you know?" Subutai said, loosening his hold.

"He sent a messenger to the khan to-night," said Lev, breathlessly, "his four Kirghiz prisoners have disappeared."

Subutai frowned and said:

"Why do you tell me this, Lev?"

"Because you are a true man, captain," said Lev. "Because I know you for a man who will act bravely, not sell his knowledge."

"But I don't understand," said Subutai—"one time you told me that gold——"

He broke off and stared at Lev in the dark. Thunder rumbled, far away. He said, with a last suspicion:

"And your own master—Zebek—why should you betray——"

"Because like yourself, captain," Lev said, "I too am a Torgut, or try to be——"

Subutai stared at him a moment longer, and then he seized Lev's hand.

"I wish I could understand you, neighbour," he said.

Lev blinked.

"You do, captain," he said softly. "Now go."

Subutai ran for his horse, he rode swiftly toward the khan's camp. . . .

In the meantime, Temuru and Momotubash had left the khan's tent. For a time the khan had sat studying some crude maps of the Bak-pak Dala, the great desert that lay to the east. Then a messenger from Zebek had arrived.

Ubasha studied his cousin's careful script. Zebek wanted an interview, he repented his words and actions that night in the Aris Kum. In days like these, Zebek wrote, petty feelings must be buried and all must work for the good of the horde. It was humiliating, however, to appear before the sentries, the Cossacks, Cedar-chab—all of whom must have observed his shame and drunkenness that night. Zebek begged Ubasha to meet him in the ravine that sloped down to the Sary Su. . . .

Ubasha passed the sentries, he paused with the messenger at the head of the ravine. The oppressive sky, the lightning, the dark and wooded ravine at his feet, all made him uneasy. He thought petulantly, Why couldn't Zebek come to his tent? But then he immediately thought, with a warmth of feeling, Ah, the good Zebek! a few words went a long way, often—Zebek was ashamed of himself, and the khan could do no less than meet him half-way. Besides, what if the night was threatening, the ravine dark? He was in the midst of his own people; no harm could possibly come. The messenger, sensing Ubasha's thought, saw to his weapons before he rode cautiously down the wooded slope. And Ubasha, with no further reluctance, followed. . . .

When the khan left his camp, a woman suddenly emerged from one of the near-by tents. She was clad in a thin silk sleeping gown, she wore a Persian veil over her face. She moved furtively in the darkness, keeping in shadow, until she came to where Michailov and the Cossacks were resting. Here she remained a moment, whispering with Michailov; and then she softly withdrew. In the khan's tent, she stood watching.

Michailov and the Cossacks crept toward the two sentries, leaping on them from the dark, stifling their shouts, overpowering them. One of the Cossacks, breathing harshly, pointed a dagger he had drawn from one sentry's belt at the man's heart. But Michailov struck his hand aside, he bound and gagged the Torgut guards. Then he and the Cossacks, armed with weapons taken from the sentries, disappeared into the dark ravine.

At this moment, Subutai rode up.

He saw no sentries. In alarm, he spurred toward the khan's tent. In the dim light of a lamp, he saw a woman standing there. For a moment he thought it was Cedar-chab; his heart beat madly. But when he leaped from his horse, she raised her veil. He saw it was Sand-chab, then.

"Quick!" she whispered. "They're planning to kill the khan!"

The excitement, the feverish glow of conspiracy was on the thin face of the khan's elder sister as she spoke. Subutai said, bewildered:

"Where? how do you know?"

"The Lama Loosang," she said excitedly. She added, "He talks in his sleep. Look you, Subutai. The Kirghiz come soon, four of them, dressed in Torgut clothes. I have already freed the Cossacks and sent them down—in the ravine——"

Subutai vaulted into his saddle.

"You gamble with the khan's life!" he shouted harshly.

Sand-chab stared at him with a strange and sudden smile, like a demented woman, like a figure in a dream.

"Ah, yes," she whispered irrationally, "but surely Cedar-chab is a high stake!"

Subutai was already galloping down the dark slope.

The khan, preceded by Zebek's messenger, had come to the bottom of the ravine.

A distance of perhaps three hundred feet still remained

between here and where the ravine joined the bed of the river. The vast under-tone of sounds from the encamped horde could no longer be heard. The near and far lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, an occasional human cry, a shot, a sound of distant shouting, a faint sound of singing far away—all these ordinary, reassuring sounds that rose from the millions of people and animals encamped along the Sary Su River were, here between the steep wooded walls of the ravine, unheard. In the dead silence of the ravine, it seemed that the Torgut horde—the vast security of thousands upon thousands of men and beasts—must be miles and miles away.

The khan reined his horse, silent and nervous ; he peered all about him in the gloom. Here the woods were thickest, the air most sultry and dark. Thunder rumbled ; and far overhead, now, the glow of lightning flickered occasionally. The khan clutched his sword tightly.

Even the messenger seemed a bit unnerved by the dark, the silence, the heavy air. He drew a dagger from his belt. But there was no one about, Zebek had not yet arrived. Leaving the khan, the messenger rode forward cautiously, calling softly :

“ Zebek ? ”

There was no answer. The khan waited, feeling more at ease. Thunder sounded again, more closely. Suddenly the khan heard a gasp, a thud.

He called out tensely :

“ Are you all right, messenger ? ”

There was no sound. The khan, looking all around, urged his horse forward quietly. The horse stumbled over the body of the messenger.

A flare of lightning revealed the man dead at his feet. The khan raised his eyes. Before the lightning ceased playing in the dark sky overhead, he saw four men just beyond.

His heart pounded ; but he saw they were dressed in Torgut clothes.

"Ho, there!" he cried out in relief. "Quick—something's happened to the messenger!"

But the men didn't answer—twigs crackled under the feet of their horses as they closed around him in the dark. Now the khan shouted, backing away. And through the trees, crashing through dry bushes in the dark, the Cossacks arrived.

Thunder rolled, lightning flared again.

The Cossacks leaped at the backs, the throats of the khan's assassins. Ubasha himself now struck out fiercely with his fine Damascus sword—a gift from Krim Khan of Astrakhan to his father the Donduk Ombo—piercing one of the Kirghiz through the heart. Men grunted, steel clashed on steel.

Into the midst of the fight rode Subutai.

The men struggled silently in the dark, aided by the more frequent flashes of lightning. The Cossacks killed two of the Kirghiz, Subutai killed one. The dead men lay in the ravine near the messenger betrayed by their trap. Perhaps they too, like the Cossacks, had been promised freedom or death. The khan looked down at them, wiping his forehead; and then he looked at his rescuers, trying to see in the dark.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said in a shaking voice. "And may I ask, who are you?"

"Michailov, sir, and your Cossacks."

"And you?"

"Subutai."

The khan fervently pressed their hands, breathing hard.

"I'd like no word of this to spread," he said brokenly, "it would be bad for the horde."

"But they meant to kill," said Subutai.

"Poor devils!" muttered the khan. "It's too terrible, you understand—not a word!"

"Yes, sir," Subutai said reluctantly.

After a moment's silence, Ubasha said to Subutai:

"Captain, I wish you'd take our Russian friends and set

them free, somewhere in the west. . . . Take yonder horses, provide them as best we can. I hope they may safely see Russia again."

"Thank you, Excellency," said Michailov.

Thunder rolled heavily, a wind came down through the trees, more lightning flared.

"And Subutai," said Ubasha, laying a trembling hand on Subutai's arm, "my deepest thanks and trust. Once we find land and peace, perchance——"

He broke off, emotionally.

Subutai pressed his hand gratefully. Surely the khan knew, he thought—surely the khan was thinking of Cedar-chab ! Subutai's voice was vibrant with happiness.

"I wish only to serve you and our people, O khan !" he said. "Shall we return up the slope ?"

"No, I'll go alone," Ubasha said abruptly, riding away.

A few heavy drops of rain fell, splashing on Subutai's face.

Crossing the Sary Su with the Cossacks, riding westward through the suddenly rain-drenched jubilant horde, Subutai too, in his own way mindless of the sad and heavy fall of rain, lifted a radiant face to the dark sky.

CHAPTER SEVEN



In the heavy shower the Torguts, hysterically shouting to one another, held tent-cloths and buckets to catch the water. The rain soon passed, but for a few hours the river flowed knee-deep. People, animals, all pushed their way into the muddy stream. Overhead the stars reappeared and the full moon shone down with a cool, clear light. Before dawn the flow of the river slackened and soon the brackish bottoms were dry again, except for a few shallow pools where animals still nuzzled and snorted, jostling one another in the waning moonlight.

The people were weary from the labour of filling the carts, bucket by bucket, during the night. But they recalled the freshness of the falling rain ; they gazed with satisfaction at the carts nearly full, their round walls still damp and glistening in the dawn. When the sun rose, hot and dry as usual, people and beasts alike slept peacefully for the first time since leaving the Turgai lands.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was low in the west, when the evening star beckoned in the east over the shadowy waste-land of the Bak-pak Dala, the Torgut migration began again.

Trumpets and the long horns of leather and shell were blown, sounding far and near along the banks of the Sary Su and beyond.

Horsemen dashed far ahead, cleaving the dusky air with shouts as they rode, rejoining the armies of fighters in the vanguard and flanking the horde.

Carts and animals lumbered across the dry river and into

the desert beyond. Women and children rode on horseback herding the gaunt cattle and sheep. Dogs barked, the animals bleated and lowed, creating a great volume of sound that rolled like a heavy cloud over the earth already rumbling with the movement of thousands on thousands of groaning wheels and lumbering hooves.

Beyond the Sary Su, on the borders of the great Hunger Steppe, the Bak-pak Dala, the hoshuns and aimaks of each ulus came closer, compacting themselves into mighty columns again, resuming a migratory order of march. Far north and south rode the great cavalcades of horsemen, alert for dangers in the dusk. And far ahead of the Torgut horde the tough fighters in Ubasha's command were once more leading their people eastward, toward where the evening star, translucent green, like mountain jade, was already setting in the dusk.

This was June 10.

For a few days, people and animals moved ahead into the desert with new energy and confidence. The rain had been a good omen, the Torguts felt—a sign that all would be well. The warriors rode in ceaseless vigil along the forty-mile flank of the great migration, but neither Kirghiz nor Bashkirs were seen. It seemed that the worst of their long and difficult travel would soon be over.

At first, even the dread lands of the Bak-pak Dala, of which terrible tales had been heard, seemed less ominous than the hot sands of Aris Kum which the Torguts had crossed during May.

This was stony land, a barren land of gravel and gentle undulations of sand. Where the beds of ancient dry lakes were crossed, shells and salts that glittered like rhine in the moonlight crunched firmly under cart-wheels and hooves of beasts. On the gravelled plains, where occasional slopes of clay were found, there were tufts and clumps of grass, burned white by the sun, and in the gravel rose the pale yellow spikes of chi-chi grass.

A few small wells were seen, crusted with salt and soda. The camels, who enjoyed the bitter alkali salts, drank at these water-holes. The people looked at the white and poisonous wells with vague misgiving, beginning to realize, for the first time, that they were going deeper every day into the most terrible desert of Asia. Days became hotter, even at night the air seemed to shimmer with heat. The occasional wind had a dry burned odour that made the animals toss their heads restlessly in the moonlight. They uttered low and reluctant sounds, looking back toward the west. Even the people moved more slowly, growing silent and dubious again. But the rumbling of the water-carts was still somewhat assuring. And the fine deep wells of Kos Kuduk were not far head. The Torguts—a vast army of people and beasts, but dwarfed and frightened by the desert into which they had come—moved eastward with growing uneasiness.

On June 20 they reached the wells of Kos Kuduk.

Sight of the oasis, the trees, brought sighs of relief from all who had hidden or denied their growing fear of the Bakpak Dala.

But the fine deep wells had been poisoned—likely by the Kirghiz herdsmen whom Subutai had seen in the distance when he reconnoitred this far ahead from the Sary Su. The wild poplars, many of them hollow and crusted with salt in their dead trunks, their boughs coated with soda and saline dust, stood mournful guard over the useless water. And the deep grass that had grown on all sides of the Kos Kuduk wells—this, with bitter anger at the Torgut approach, the Kirghiz had burned to the roots.

A second sigh, more like a shuddering premonition, passed through the horde. People glanced furtively at one another, trying to conceal their consternation. Beasts prowled and nosed among the black shrivelled roots of grass. People stared unbelievably at the ruined wells. They began, almost mechanically, to move past the oasis of Kos Kuduk. The long and straggling columns of the Torgut horde,

bitterly disappointed, crawled by. . . . Yet the carts were still half full of water—there must be other wells somewhere ahead ! People said these things to one another, trying to mask the fear that had returned to their eyes. Staring back furtively at the destroyed oasis of Kos Kuduk, the Torguts crawled on eastward, beyond, into the desert that had closed, like a dry hand around each one's throat, on all sides of the helpless people.

They moved more slowly now, straggling, preoccupied.

As they approached the heart of the Bak-pak Dala, the great desolate Hunger Steppe of Central Asia began to reveal its true and terrible nature.

The heat became terrific, even in the darkest part of the night. Oxen died, carts of meat had to be abandoned on the stony plains—for the cattle who might have hauled the loads were becoming too weak to do more than stagger along by themselves. Many people died, too, and were left on the rocks where lizards and snakes crawled in the twilight.

No other forms of life were seen, no birds, not even vultures hung in the cloudless sky over the abandoned beasts and humans who died in these waste-lands.

A few salty wells, a few sad hollow poplars were seen. Only the camels halted, licking the saline soda, only the camels thrived. The spears and spikes of yellow and white grass burned by the sun became more rare.

Winds blew suddenly, sporadically, hot and filled with sandy dust.

People and animals, blinded by heat and sandy winds, stumbled and floundered in great pits of sand—in barkhans, those great sickle-shaped dunes blown by the wind, grey sand, streaked with drifts of yellow and white that had blown over the gravel and rock of the Bak-pak Dala.

Now the people muttered and complained—more ominously than before rain fell on the banks of the Sary Su ; more openly blaming the princes and generals, and even the khan himself. By the middle of July animals were dying in

droves, the water-carts were nearly empty again, in spite of all care. Strange rumours began to spread through the horde—that the khan was mad, that he was leading them all to destruction.

Ubasha grew haggard and gaunt, his eyes were feverish with doubt and despair. He thought that he knew where the rumours came from, yet he remained silent. All day and night, he kept a large guard of trustworthy men at his side. He studied maps, he slept little. And finally he counselled a change in the course of the horde, a move north-east towards the wells and sparse pasture of the Middle Horde of the Kirghiz tribes.

The princes and generals agreed. The khan relaxed a little, full of a renewed hope ; he was the khan, the undisputed leader of the Torgut nation. Only Zebek, of all the council members, failed to appear at the Sarga or to agree with Ubasha's plan. He remained in his own ulus, to the south, shrugging and muttering that it was useless to advise the khan.

North on the border of the Bak-pak Dala was a great mound—the Chekman Kalgan, an ancient and forgotten memento of Genghis Khan.

Here on the central lands of Asia, the eldest part of the world, grass had one time grown deep and green. Vast lakes and clear streams once existed surrounded by trees. Clouds of wild-fowl had flown in the sweet air, people had lived in a pastoral land of plenty.

All this had been long before Genghis Khan ; but all this had gone, before his time.

From the south, over the once fertile plains of the Bak-pak Dala, great swarms of men had come, destroying what grassland remained, channelling the streams, growing bright green gardens along the rivers and lakes, leaving the grassland to wither and burn and disappear.

The climate of the region had changed, too. Lakes grew dry, the streams no longer reached the marshy pools and the

great rivers to which they had once been tributary. The waters sank into the withering land like sighs.

And then Genghis Khan appeared, calling himself the purger of corruption and evil, plundering and murdering millions of those who had built and dwelled in white-domed cities and green gardens in the midst of a world of dust and sand.

On the sites of such ancient cities he left great mounds, the debris of buildings, the bodies of the dead, often leaving great symbols painted on the mounds :

Beware, O Destroyers of Grass and Freedom !

He left armies and herdsmen in his wake, laws and administrators to restore the land to its primitive use once more—the avenger of slavery, restorer of freedom and grass, he was called.

But it was too late ; and the climate, and the course of human history, continued their relentless way, when he was dead, undisturbed.

And among the remnants of Turkish and Kirghiz peoples, reduced to barbarism and poverty, lingering on the edges of the silent and desolate land of Bak-pak Dala, there remained a fierce and savage hatred of all the Mongols.

The symbols and legends on the side of the Chekman Kalgan had long since disappeared—even the great mound itself was over-blown with sand, covered with scrubby growths of bushes and grass.

Its meaning was unknown, to the Kirghiz as well as the Torguts.

But the Kirghiz suddenly appeared, in bitter and fanatical force, near the Chekman Kalgan, on the northern border of Bak-pak Dala, when the Torgut Mongols approached.

The Torguts found that all the wells of this more habitable region had been poisoned. All the grass, however sparse, had been burned. Kirghiz herdsmen of the Middle Horde had retreated, burning and poisoning, before the Torgut advance. And now, supported by Bashkirs and Kirghiz

of the Little Horde—who had been following the Torguts at a distance ever since crossing the Sary Su—the Kirghiz were massed in the hilly lands, among the rocks and ravines, near the Chekman Kalgan.

To fight here, the Torguts felt, would be futile and costly. What would be gained? Likely the Kirghiz would burn and poison, retreating deeper into the northern hills, destroying and killing as they went. . . . Disillusioned, weary, the Torguts turned southward again, searching for what sparse grass and unpoisoned wells might be found.

And the Kirghiz began once more to pursue the Torgut horde. Again in the night, riding in swift and savage bands, they began to sweep down on straggling and unprotected people and animals. . . . Back into the heart of the Bak-pak Dala they pursued and harassed the desperate Torguts.

The Torguts began muttering again that the khan was mad, not to have ordered an attack on the Kirghiz hills at Chekman Kalgan. Everyone knew that all the princes and generals except Zebek had counselled retreat into the Bak-pak Dala. At the time, all the people had agreed that it was the only reasonable thing to do. But in the increasing heat, on the barren and hopeless wastes of the Hunger Steppe, relentlessly pursued by their fanatical foes, people were no longer rational.

Rumours spread again through the horde that Zebek, long ago, had advised travelling south of the desert, along the River Chu—but that the khan despotically had refused such counsel.

And when the horde was driven back into the heart of the fierce and burning wastes—to the edge of the Kurminin Kum, a desert within a desert—then the people rebelled.

They came to the khan, pleading with him to go south to the River Chu, raising their voices in the hot and dreadful silence of the parched plain, demanding water and rest.

Ubasha listened, and then he said :

“ Think you—have I done nothing, am I to blame ? ”

"Yes, you deny Zebek's counsel!" the bolder ones cried.

The khan's eyes glittered in their sunken sockets. He saw the desperate, hopeless faces of his people, the dusty clothes, the dry and bright scorched eyes. He gazed eastward, over the still more fierce and shimmering wastes of the Kurminin Kum, toward the mirage of hope, of fame, of love amongst his delivered people—all of which grew ever more dim through tears of despair, of pity, of the very heat itself. And he said:

"I have given all—my animals and water, my wealth—nothing have I kept for myself. Only a little more, just beyond, and we shall find water and rest."

But his voice, dry and uneven, broke.

"No, we want the Chu—Zebek is right!" the people shouted wildly. "We want no more of your promises!"

Ubasha tried to wet his lips, several times he tried to speak. Finally he said:

"Very well—let us try the Chu, and see what comes."

But when the horde turned with irrational hope toward the River Chu, somewhere in the south, the result was even costlier than in the unlucky shift toward the northern hills. For in the south the Torguts found a still more fierce and savage array of enemies, Turkish warriors as well as Kirghiz now, barring their way. A swift and disastrous battle was fought, south of the horde, in which many of the best Torgut soldiers were lost. The Torgut fighters were outnumbered—many of their troops were riding on other flanks of the horde, patrolling and fighting stray bands of savages to the west and north. The Torguts slowly retreated again, this time to the north, weary and sick of ceaseless war and disaster. . . . From the south as well as the north, it seemed, baleful and frenzied foes sought to force them into the burning ruins of the terrible desert.

The fright and hysteria of the people became extreme.

Rumours travelled fanatically again. Once more the khan had blundered. His move to the south had been as

false and hopeless as his move to the north. The khan was leading them in a mad blind zigzag over the Bak-pak Dala. . . . So the rumours ran.

Once more, the people clamoured.

"Give us Zebek!" they cried. "Zebek will save us—Zebek has a plan!"

Hopeless and defeated, the khan yielded at last. He sent a messenger to the southern ulus, calling Zebek to his tent.

It was August 2, a dry and stifling night.

Zebek arrived at dusk, he entered the khan's tent arrogantly.

"You sent for me?" he said.

Ubasha's face twitched, he made a desperate effort to smile.

"Yes, cousin," he said hoarsely, "we've missed you."

"That's unfortunate," Zebek said, "I thought you wanted to do without me."

"For god's sake, Zebek," the khan cried, "what's past is past!"

Zebek smiled with a cold and wary cynicism at his cousin.

"Everything?" he said softly.

The khan's eyes lowered, and for a moment he said nothing.

"Everything," he muttered at last, "all is forgotten. . . ."

"Ah," said Zebek. "And so?"

The khan's fingers trembled as he leaned his hands on the low table between them, his glittering eyes sought Zebek's.

"You have a plan," he said—"what is it?"

Zebek arched his eyebrows.

"But surely you don't expect me to give it away, Ubasha. . . . You'll recall, I'm sure, Djungaria was my original idea—but you took it for your own benefit, when the time seemed ripe. Although," Zebek added with an ironical smile, "I must say, you haven't done very well with it, cousin."

The khan looked at Zebek with pleading and desperate eyes.

"At least tell me," he said hoarsely, "what would your plan provide?"

"Water."

"Ah, if it would!"

"But at a price."

The khan's eyes flickered. Zebek's eyes were glittering like his own. The khan said faintly:

"What price?"

"Cedar-chab without kalim."

Ubasha stared at his hands, he tried to control their tremor.

"Very well," he said faintly, without looking up.

"And the custody of your son," Zebek said, "in case anything should happen to you."

"For god's sake, Zebek!" Ubasha cried, desperately.

Zebek rose contemptuously.

"As you like," he said, shrugging.

"Ah, wait," cried Ubasha, leaping to his feet. "I'll do it—I give my word——"

"I want better than your word," Zebek said harshly.

"I want this done in the Sarga, before I leave, and betrothal to Cedar-chab."

"To-morrow, whenever you say—to-night!" the khan said brokenly.

"Very well," said Zebek. "And I shall need two troops of one hundred men, and two brave captains—for instance," he said with a speculative scowl, "I'll take Temuru's son, Subutai, and Rabdan the nephew of Choktu. And send two hundred water-carts loaded with dried meat to my ulus," he added haughtily. "I'll not move, mind, till you keep your word."

When Zebek had gone, the khan sat for a long time, staring at his hands. At last he called a messenger and asked for Cedar-chab. But when she came, he waved her away,

without looking up. The expression on his averted face was so tortured, so terrible, that although her heart beat fearfully, she turned silently and withdrew. After a long wait, Ubasha raised his head and sent a messenger to find the Saissang Temuru. . . .

Some time later in the night, Subutai approached the kahn's tent.

He had been far east, in the Kurminin Kum, the great silent desert that lay just ahead, the dread heart of the Bakpak Dala, empty of all water, all life, all grass. Returning to the Torgut vanguard, he had looked for his father. Unable to find him, Subutai had made his report to Momotubash, instead. The old soldier said :

"Temuru has gone to the khan. It grows late, time to move—unless we're to stay here for the night. . . . Perhaps something has occurred. Go to the khan's camp and learn what we should do."

It was a good many miles to the khan's camp. Subutai had been riding and fighting for many days, he had eaten little and slept rarely, he was weary and sick at heart of the endless war and travel. But a faint smile flickered across his gaunt young face, as he galloped toward the centre of the vast encampment.

He dismounted a short distance from the khan's tent. His heart began to beat furiously when he saw Ubasha and Temuru, who were seated together under the blue silk cloth, peer out with curious looks toward where he stood in the dark. Then his father rose heavily and came towards Subutai.

"Let us go yonder," the old warrior growled. He led his son past the khan's sleeping tents whose blue cloth glowed luminously from lamps burning within. They came to a large flat rock near-by, still hot from the sun. The old man said gruffly, "Sit down—light a pipe."

Temuru hadn't seen his son closely for many months. He'd had no chance to talk with Subutai as a father should.

But now, as he sat silently in the dark watching Subutai strike fire for his tobacco, he suddenly saw that the boy had become a man. He'd heard many tales of Subutai's bravery, of his fabulous invulnerability, his restless stamina, his uncanny skill and caution in leading his men. He'd listened to those tales, smiling and saying, "The boy has good stuff in him—some day he'll make a good man, a fighter." But he'd never noticed, until now, that Subutai had grown into an exceptional man. Proudly, he observed the gaunt line of his son's cheek, his calm chin and mouth, his strong hand holding the pipe, his mature and thoughtful brow, his keen and steady eyes. And in the presence of this unknown and silent son, Temuru floundered uncomfortably for words to say what he must.

"I'm happy to tell you," he growled at last, "that Ubasha wishes to reward your bravery, your loyalty—he's entering your name among the White Bone."

His voice quavered a little, his hand trembled as he gripped Subutai's dry fingers. Subutai's heart beat fast—what could this mean? Restraining his thoughts, he peered through the dark at his father's face.

"To-morrow," Temuru said, "he wishes you and Rabdan to take two hundred men and go somewhere with the Prince Zebek for water."

The old man hesitated. Subutai knew that he had something else to say. Temuru looked toward the east, where a deep red moon was just rising among the carts and tents. Subutai's throat felt dryer than usual, his heart skipped a beat. He wet his lips. The old man finally said:

"Subutai. You and I are fighting men, isn't it so?"

He swung around and placed a gnarled hand on his son's knee.

"Look you, killing and death is not what we seek," he said in a low voice, "nor do we admire it needlessly. It's not for ourselves we fight—but for our people."

He sighed deeply, peering unhappily toward the red moon.

"Fighting is one thing," he said, "it's the path such men as you and I have taken. Where it leads, who can say? Yet something else, Subutai, is a man's own good, which he must yield—even his life if need be."

"Ah," cried Subutai, "speak out—what is it then?"

Temuru withdrew his hand.

"You must free Cedar-chab from a childish oath," he said harshly, rising abruptly. "She must betroth herself to another."

He spat angrily. Then he gripped Subutai's shoulder.

"Beware of Zebek," he muttered.

He walked away quickly.

Subutai laughed bitterly, sitting motionlessly on the stone. What good was it, that he had now become one of the White Bone? Merely to have his name inscribed on a special roll of the Torgut Census was not what he sought. When he recalled the blazing sun, his eyeballs burned white as the grass, the hot wind in his throat, his flesh like dried meat—when he recalled these things, Subutai thought surely it was because of Cedar-chab, and only so, that he endured such a life. The sureness of her smile, her words like talismans of hope, had been with him through all this time of war and misery. Now even these remembered things, even her laughter recalled from childhood, were to be taken from him. With her he had broken many laws of his people, touching her lips and breasts, acting more like a stranger, a Russian perhaps, instead of, like a Torgut warrior, taking her ruthlessly for his own. Somewhere these things were known, and now, like a great sword from somewhere among the stars, vengeance was coming in a sharp arc to part them for ever.

Subutai looked up at the sky, where the reddish moon, rising in the dry and dusty air, was already staining the night, casting over the Torgut horde, the great slumbering

and murmuring encampment of people and beasts in the vast desert, a strange ominous glow.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, muttering rebelliously ; and he strode toward the blue tents where the khan's family slept.

Near the tents he paused. His heart was beating wildly, he could scarcely breathe. From all the distant miles of the Torgut encampment came a low and uneasy murmur, from people and animals, all stirring, even in sleep, restlessly under the strange moon. In a dark tent the khan's child cried, fretting in the heat, and Mandere murmured to comfort him. The side-walls of the tents had been lowered to keep out the hot wind and the sand. In the next tent, still luminous with a lamp burning within, Sand-chab coughed and choked. Some distance away a guard stood with his back turned, smoking and looking up at the red moon. Subutai strode on toward the luminous blue tent and entered abruptly.

In the centre of the tent stood Cedar-chab, as though she had been listening for something, curiously, as though she had been waiting. Sand-chab lay on a mat, leaning on a thin elbow ; she peered at Subutai with feverish eyes. Subutai advanced toward Cedar-chab, wetting his dry lips.

"I have come for you now," he said harshly.

For a moment they stood looking at one another. Then she reached up and touched the scar on his hollow cheek with a trembling finger.

"Ah, god," she murmured, "what have they done to you, Subutai ?"

"Nothing," he whispered, staring at her, "nothing at all. . . . But you, Cedar-chab—your eyes, your cheeks——"

She tried to smile, saying :

"Am I so ugly, then ?"

But he seized her roughly.

"I have come," he said, "do you understand ?"

Sand-chab whispered suddenly :

"Take her and ride, Subutai, far and fast—happiness is like a star, like the wind——"

Cedar-chab looked quietly at Subutai.

"I am ready now," she said.

And Subutai, then, seized Cedar-chab in his arms and strode over the threshold of her blue tent, carrying her swiftly through the strange moonlight to his white mare tethered near-by.

"Where are we going, Subutai?" she whispered.

He swung into the saddle, placing her before him with her legs across his thighs. His heart beat madly. He seemed hypnotized by the moon, intoxicated by the strange night, irrational as a man in a dream. He laughed exultantly, feeling her head against his chest.

"Where do we go, then?" she repeated.

"I don't know," he said recklessly, "perhaps where happiness can be found——"

"Can such a place be, Subutai?"

"Let us see, then," he said, covering her with his kalat.

"But are you afraid?"

"No, not for myself——"

"For what, Cedar-chab?"

She held her head poised, just as when he entered the tent, with the same curious air of listening, of expecting something. But she made no answer. Only, in spite of the hot wind blowing over the desert, she seemed to shiver a little as she lowered her head again and clutched, with her small hands, his broad and faded blue belt.

"As for me," he cried, with the same strange recklessness as before, "I fear nobody now, nothing——"

And turning his white mare's head toward the rising moon, Subutai galloped off with Cedar-chab. There was no plan in his head, nothing but the wild and rebellious ecstasy that had come suddenly upon him. Somewhere beyond the Torgut horde, somewhere in the vast world, beyond the desert, beyond the enemies that encircled the horde, beyond

the reach of laws and enemies among his own people, somewhere beyond the unhappiness that was gripping them all with death and madness, somewhere, like the green grass and the cool blue wind of spring, was happiness. His lips drew back from his white teeth, his breath whistled fiercely in the face of the hot wind. Fleeing between the great flocks and herds, down the corridors between tents and carts, Subutai galloped.

Hooves sounded behind him, or so it seemed.

Without looking back, baring his teeth still more whitely in the crimson moonlight, Subutai urged his Bar-Kul mare faster. She galloped sure-footedly as ever, dodging rocks in the corridors between hoshuns and herds, out-distancing dogs that ran snapping savagely at her heels. But the wider corridors near the heart of the Torgut encampment gave way to more narrow, more twisting passages, and sometimes the restless cattle and sheep left little or no open space between their uneasy herds. The wild and exulting look on Subutai's face became desperate, urging his mare through the occasional masses of animals, his eyes fixed, strange and sightless, on some infinite distance, some place of freedom, some goal that seemed always, like star or wind, still beyond. . . .

Behind came the beat of hooves. And from behind, now, came the sound of people, too, muttering as they were wakened from sleep by the wild passage of Subutai and Cedar-chab. Silent, motionless, she clung to Subutai, under his billowing kalat. She heard the hooves, she heard the voices, too. When the mare, lathered and troubled, slowed, or seemed trapped among the carts and animals, then the voices could be heard more clearly. Cedar-chab held her head poised again, listening, as though she could hear the desperate cries, pleading for water, for rest, for peace. Passing through some hoshuns of Temuru's, of his own aimak, Subutai could hear voices that seemed, alone of all things in the strange night, familiar. When the mare slowed,

as though the Torgut people and beasts were somehow trapping their dream-like flight, listening, like Cedar-chab, it seemed to Subutai that he could hear voices calling *Subutai*, *Subutai*! as though calling his name in their unhappiness and their need. And now Subutai, with his face growing slowly care-worn and quiet again, ceased forcing his mare, slowed her, easing his wild and desperate urging, letting her slow then to a walk. The sound of pursuing hooves died away, the voices drifted in the uneasy whispering of all the people and beasts, still, like an impassable wall, surrounding them for many miles under the blood-red moon.

At length Subutai whispered :

"Cedar-chab?"

"Yes?" she said, putting his kalat aside.

He was looking far away, with haunted and desperate eyes, toward the unseen horizon where happiness and freedom might somehow be. . . .

"I—I give back your oath," he said hoarsely.

She said, finally, in a small voice :

"But is it yours, Subutai, to give?"

"No—nor was it mine ever, to take."

For a moment they sat there, in the strange dim light, not looking at one another—thinking of the cold and sparkling night, Chagan-Sara Eve, perhaps, sitting now in the gloom, their eyes averted, in the hot and dusty air of the great desert. And then suddenly she turned, clinging to him, sobbing against his chest—and his breath seemed to choke, he tried to stroke her dry black hair, her braids with their little red ribbons.

"It can't be," he said desperately, at last. "There can be no happiness beyond our people, for me—"

"Nor for me," she whispered, "but then what of us, O Subutai?"

Now from the gloom came Bagha, nudging his weary horse forward, approaching them with a thoughtful but apologetic manner.

"This was not your destiny," he said quietly, raising his hand toward the sky—"not what the stars speak for Cedar-chab and Subutai——"

He leaned forward and touched Cedar-chab pleadingly.

"Come back with me now," he said gently, "no harm shall come to you—not yet——"

Subutai looked at the stars, obscured by the reddish dust of the moon, he looked at Cedar-chab and then at the shaman. His wildness, his strange recklessness, were gone. Troubled and unhappy, Subutai said :

"O wise Bagha, tell me then—what do the stars say ? "

The shaman looked troubled, too. He raised his face toward the red moon.

"That I can't tell, not yet—except your destinies are together, somehow," he said, in a voice that seemed strange and distant as the stars themselves. "Yet I can say this—she may betroth Zebek, yet they shall never redeem their oaths. . . ."

Subutai peered through the unearthly light at the shaman.

"This you know, O Bagha," he said, "nothing more ? "

"Nothing more," said Bagha, lowering his face from the obscure stars.

Silently, then, Subutai lifted Cedar-chab from his horse and gave her into the care of the kindly wizard, reluctantly parting her fingers from his own.

"God be with you, my Subutai," she whispered.

"And you," he said, desperate and forlorn.

She turned and smiled faintly back, as Bagha rode slowly away.

"Always," she said.

And then she was gone. Subutai sat motionless for a moment, wrapped in a crimson light like a man whose destiny, not yet clear, nevertheless falls already across his face in a sombre and lonely stain of death. For a moment

he sat there with his own anguish grown suddenly vast as the Torgut people encircled in the strange night by savage enemies and blazing deserts and stars. And then he too, setting his face grimly toward the west where his soldiers waited, rode into the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Zebek sat in his tent, on the following night, sipping arrack and gazing with a sinister smile at his Jew. It was dusk, and the twilight was swiftly ebbing, it would soon be dark. Lev, squatting uncomfortably near his master, peered along his great nose like a hypnotized bird.

"You know, Jew," Zebek finally said, softly, "I'd have you whipped if I wished, torn limb from limb, gutted like a sheep."

"Merciful master, great prince," Lev said, blinking, "all things are possible."

Zebek quit smiling.

"It was you," he said suddenly, quietly, "who warned the khan."

Lev blinked, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Be quiet, Jew," Zebek said, "it's all come out just the same. . . . But still, I'd like to know why you did."

"Noble lord," Lev said with faint sarcasm, "I'm not a man of killing—I'm a man of thought, of gold."

"You got no gold from Ubasha."

"How penetrating, master ! . . . No, but I saved your life."

"How so ?"

"Why, mighty lord, rich prince," said Lev, blinking like a great bird, "don't you know, it's far safer to kill by tricks than otherwise."

"Ah !"

"And furthermore," said Lev, staring like an owl at

Zebek, "I serve you by addition, not by subtraction. Would it be wise, think you, to remove a khan in the midst of trouble? For if it could no longer detract from him, master, then likely on you yourself might fall the blame for our people's sufferings and trouble——"

"Enough, Jew!" Zebek said angrily. "How dare you say *our*?"

"Master," Lev said quietly, "am I not a living man, one of the people?"

"Living," said Zebek, "but not for long! I've a good mind to end your bleating myself."

"You can't frighten me, lord," said Lev, "you may threaten or kill, as you wish—but nothing more."

"What!" said Zebek, leaning forward and studying his Jew intently. "You're not afraid to die?"

"I dislike the idea—but I dislike many things you do, master."

". . . You have nerve, I'll say that," Zebek said at last. "Tell me, are all Jews like yourself?"

"Jews are of many kinds, as other people. Some labour like slaves, some are wise men, and some deal in gold. But most Jews have one thing in common."

"What's that?"

"Hope. A Jew may sell his body, his thoughts, for gold. But he'll only sell his life, master, for an idea."

"An idea?" Zebek said musingly.

"Freedom."

Zebek laughed harshly.

"That's a fool's idea," he said, "a rich man is always free."

"Not always, not all men are rich," said Lev. "Mark you, wise lord, my people are old. One time we lived in a land of mighty kings, and we were rich, but we were oppressed. And so, like your own people, our whole tribe fled over the deserts until they came to a new land. And here they were in worse bondage than before, after a time,

although some were rich. There was nowhere more to flee, for wherever man flees the hand of history pursues him. And they fought their oppressor, and their oppressor destroyed our cities and laws, and dispersed our people to the far corners of the world. But mark you, lord, we learned one thing. Riches don't free men, but enslave their souls. Our priests, our men of wealth enslaved our shepherds, our poor. Had they stood together, truly as brothers, they might have won. Perhaps not, perhaps it was too soon. Yet in far lands, some of us seek wealth, yet all seek brothers. For only in the brotherhood of man lies freedom, lord."

"You're a fanatical man, Jew, a dangerous man," said Zebek, after a time. He sipped his arrack, and then propped his chin on his hand, staring at Lev. "Yes," he said, "I shall have to put you out of the way."

"I don't fear death," Lev said softly. "But you won't kill me."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Lev, "you'll gain nothing thereby. One time I told you, lord—at Tcherkask, when you won me—never to make equals of inequalities. A man's thoughts, a sheep's wool. Shear the wool, master, use a man's thoughts for your own ends—but never destroy his life because of his thoughts, illustrious prince, no more than a sheep because this year's wool is of no use for your own ends."

"Ha," said Zebek, smiling again, "but I'm through with you, Jew—there's no more you can do for me——"

"There's the matter of this expedition, master," Lev said.

"Ah, yes."

Zebek frowned, he drummed on the table.

"Have the Kirghiz been reached?"

"Yes, all is arranged, they'll let you pass."

"And the meat?"

"Ready to leave, as the bargain calls for."

"And later?"

"Beran will be there."

"Ah, but he understands?"

"So I hear, lord."

"Good," said Zebek. "Now go, Jew, see that the carts are ready; count the meat again, see that the men are ready to leave."

When Lev Zolotsky had gone, Zebek sat smiling for a while and sipping arrack. All had gone well, he thought. He hadn't felt so pleased with himself and the world for many months. He was the protective guardian of the khan's son, he was the betrothed of Cedar-chab. He smiled, thinking of the brief ceremony in the hot and dusty sun. . . . How still the face, how faint the voice of Cedar-chab saying, "Now I betroth myself, on pain of death to depart from this man," how strange, how quiet and meek the khan had been! Yes, Zebek thought, the Jew was right—this was better than killing. Now there was little in his way—now he could turn his mind to further things.

For a moment, Zebek thought of Russia, far away to the west, beyond the deserts and swamps. The Jew had mentioned Tcherkask, making him recall the glitter and strange fascination of Russian life. For a moment he thought, dispiritedly, what life in Djungaria might be, how dull, how barren it would seem.

But then he poured himself a new drink of arrack, dismissing such thoughts with a shrug. For in Russia the Tsarina had refused to make him the khan, the Russians were far too greedy themselves. And in Djungaria, even under the Chinese khan, things would be different and better by far. . . . In all his thoughts, Zebek was not so thoroughly selfish as sometimes he seemed. He believed that land should be divided as the Russians did, among the princes and the rich; but he thought this might eliminate certain inequalities now existing between people of rank and people who merely owned sheep. He also thought that the power of the khan should be shorn, or else that the

khan be a strong man representing the princes and the rich—since there were far too many poor among the Torguts these days. He thought, vaguely, of a Torgut nation so rich, so strong, so ruled by the proper people that it might, like the Russian and Chinese empires, take its place among the powers of the world. But in thinking this, Zebek leaned toward indirection, feeling that it was far better to work by scheme and subterfuge than otherwise. He had really wanted to kill the khan, the Jew was right. . . . They were all slightly mad these days; the same ends could better be gained in another way, already well begun. And with the Chinese khan, too—it wouldn't pay to frighten him just yet; it was better to compromise, to make terms that would yield a better chance. And in China, even at the very worst, a prince like Zebek would be welcomed, properly recognized by a clever emperor like Kien Lung, the Celestial Khan. This was the proper way, all these things were good. . . . But in the case of certain people, thought Zebek, men who wanted to "conquer Djungaria," "heroes," "fanatics," "greedy creditors"—

"Great prince, illustrious benefactor," said a voice. It was Gedesu, puffing and bowing in the chain armour of Beran. He had borrowed Lev's manner of addressing Zebek, saying, "Noble debtor, all is ready, my carts are prepared."

Zebek waved him away, resuming his thought. Yes, in the case of such men, he thought with a cynical smile, it might well be, he'd care little whether death came their way soon. . . . He poured and gulped a large drink of the fiery arrack. A momentary worry crossed his mind. What if harm came to himself, what if Beran misunderstood the bargain? Zebek was not a coward. In the Mugadir Pass, on the plains of Chalkhar and later, he had ridden and fought with the rest. But he trusted no man, not even the Lama Loosang, with whom he plotted many things. Each man thought he was using the other, but who could say?

Death, for him, was only a fear of power unattained—of wrongs, according to his own social scheme, not properly righted. . . . Zebek shook himself, shrugging and gulping another drink. Then, pulling the turquoise belt higher over his blue silk kalat, seizing his sword and cloak, he strode out of his tent.

Outside dusk had ended, the night was dark.

A great many people had gathered around the carts and soldiers, speculating on the presence and purpose of such an array in Zebek's ulus. There were few fires, the air was hot and dusty, it was difficult to see. People crowded close, shaking off their lethargy and despair, peering at the expeditionary force and talking excitedly. Dogs sniffed hungrily at the water-carts, children climbed up their high round sides to peer within. People shouted to the troops.

"Where to, soldier?"

The mounted warriors shrugged. Norbo winked at Tuluku and replied:

"The White Palace, perhaps, or wherever dead soldiers go."

Only a few people laughed. Others called:

"But why carts of meat, soldier—what's it all about?"

"I don't know, neighbour," Norbo said banteringly, "maybe we're going into the desert to make some magic."

"Magic?" said a querulous old man.

"Change meat to water, uncle," said Norbo, laughing.

"Not much water in that meat," someone said.

Everyone laughed uncertainly.

"Water," cried the old man, "they're going for water!"

"It's Zebek's plan!" other people shouted, hysterically excited now. "Zebek's plan!"

When Zebek appeared, everyone shouted and cheered, thronging about him. Mothers held out their babies—showing, in the fire-light, how dry and sickly their infants were. Old people croaked hoarsely, their eyes blind with

hope, pleading for water. Zebek smiled and urged his horse through the crowd.

Rabdan and Subutai were waiting, near the head of the two columns of riders. Rabdan, a man ten years older than Subutai, peered south into the darkness. He said absently :

“How long until moon-rise, do you think?”

“Time enough,” said Subutai. “Time to travel far to the south of enemies.”

“But the meat?” murmured Rabdan.

“Eh?” said Subutai, seeming as preoccupied as his companion.

“The meat,” Rabdan said, “what’s it for?”

“Oh,” said Subutai, shrugging. “Zebek is in touch with the Kirghiz, I understand.”

“What!”

“Yes, of course,” Subutai said. “Kirghiz need meat, perhaps—we need water.”

Rabdan lowered his voice.

“But is that all?” he murmured. “What do you think, is it all right?”

Subutai frowned, and then he said :

“Look you, Rabdan. Zebek is a Torgut, no matter what else——”

Rabdan nudged him. Zebek came riding up. He peered at the two soldiers sharply.

“Ah,” he said—“are we ready to leave? . . . Captain, you go ahead,” he said to Rabdan, “I’ll see that the carts get moving properly and join you later. And you, Captain,” he said to Subutai, “ride with your men to the right and the rear of the wagon train.”

Subutai wheeled his horse, without a word to Zebek. His troop followed. Subutai tried to master his anger, his bitterness at Zebek ; he ground his teeth, his finger-nails bit into his hands. He rode back along the double column of water-carts.

These were the best, the largest carts of the horde ; and

the oxen yoked to them were the strongest, the fastest that remained of the Torgut beasts. The carts had no drivers. But a dozen skilled men, armed with whips twenty feet long and tipped with metal, rode on each side of the train. Toward the rear, there were a dozen travelling carts, all piled with things of value—copper pots, fine bowls and vases, rare pieces of furniture, hides and cloths and leather jars, copper and bronze coins, jewellery ornamented with precious and semi-precious stones, some silver and a little gold—all the vast wealth which Gedesu had been slowly and slyly accumulating since the beginning of the migration long ago. And, appearing ridiculous as ever in his chain-mail, uncomfortably astride a Turkish horse, Gedesu hovered in close watch over his wealth.

Subutai passed his brother without a word, turning his head imperceptibly aside. Somebody in the crowd, shoving to get out of the way of the riders, called loudly :

“Hey, Gedesu—here’s your brother Subutai, now you’ll be safe !”

Someone ran after Subutai, clutching at his leg. Subutai turned and looked down, he saw it was Ghashun. She clung to his leg, staring at him with frantic eyes.

She had changed, she had aged since Chagan-Sara Eve ; her face had grown old and haggard ; her hair, stringy and grey, hung unbraided from under her miserly felt cap in dry wisps.

But it was her eyes that made Subutai pause, her eyes were frighteningly changed, wild and glittering in their shrunken sockets.

Subutai felt a curious shame, a pity, seeing her thus ; and he tried gently to loose her hand from his leg. But Ghashun seized his hand in her thin fingers, muttering and crying, covering his hand with her hot tears, and with her shrivelled lips. . . .

But already the expeditionary train was moving ; the out-drivers were cracking their long whips, and the oxen

were straining forward with their loads ; the carts were lumbering over the stony ground, the troops were wheeling and trotting forward in the wake of the caravan.

Ghashun, with a sudden and piercing cry, loosed Subutai's hand and tried to throw herself under his horse. But Subutai, rearing the white mare on her haunches, wheeled safely away from Ghashun, who lay silently now on the ground.

The crowd cheered, hysterically, and the expedition moved south into the dark.

Subutai, frowning sombrely, rode slowly forward among his men. When he passed Gedesu, he paused uncertainly. But this time it was Gedesu who turned his head. Subutai looked thoughtfully at his brother. Suddenly, he saw the fat man as somehow other than what he seemed, a strange and tortured creature like his wife Ghashun, a man whose pomposity concealed, perhaps, some diffidence or regret ; the fat and ridiculous body of the man now appeared to him sad, not ludicrous but pathetic, as though a heaviness of body had descended on Gedesu because his spirit, his soul, was heavy first. And for that moment he wanted to understand the man, to touch his spirit, to greet the man as brother. But when he wheeled his horse toward Gedesu, the man turned on him with a morose and savage snarl, spitting at him. Subutai flushed, muttering to himself as he rode away. And Gedesu, seeing his brother go, opened his mouth as though to call after Subutai. His mouth remained open, his heavy chin quivered, and his face became blank and childish ; he slunk miserably among the rattling carts.

The carts and troops moved south over the dark ground, leaving the southernmost camps of the horde rapidly behind. Drivers flicked their long whips ceaselessly over the oxen's backs. The carts rumbled on stone and gravel, wheels creaked and whirled in the sand. The soldiers rode at a steady trot, watching carefully in the dark.

Once, far away over the plain, a light was seen in the east. The convoy halted instantly, becoming silent and motionless. The light flickered several times, like a star on the horizon, and then went out. Carts and troops remained quiet. Far away on the western horizon, now, a light flickered once or twice in answer.

"It's our own patrol," Zebek muttered.

The men breathed with relief. The carts began moving forward again. But the expedition travelled south in the dark with increased caution, for beyond the line of Torgut scouts the real risk of encountering Kirghiz troops began. An order came back for nobody to light a pipe, for silence. Only the sound of hooves and wheels on rock was heard, only the whirl of sand, the heavy breathing of the beasts.

The stars cast little light, the air was thick with dust and heat. The land seemed firmer underfoot after a time, less sandy; the cart-wheels brushed past tufts of dry grass with an occasional swish. Far ahead, Zebek rode with Lev and Rabdan, trying to peer through the dark. Objects only a few feet ahead were dark grey, it was impossible to see for any distance.

Yet when the riders came to an abrupt slope in the land, where Zebek muttered a low command to halt, a low ridge could be seen in the south, blurred against the faint stars, the faint rim of the sky. The men whispered, seizing their weapons tightly. Zebek gave another low command, this time to proceed toward the south-west. Here the land sloped and then rose toward the ridge. The oxen quickened their pace, the carts rattled loudly over a more rocky terrain. The troops closed in. Now they all could see, ahead, a pass faintly outlined between two shoulders of the ridge. Zebek leaned toward Lev.

"Is this the place?" he whispered.

"It must be right, master," Lev muttered in a low voice, "a slope, a ridge, a rocky pass——"

Zebek hesitated only a moment, and then he spurred

ahead. A mutter of approval travelled back among the men. Even Rabdan, wary of Zebek though he had been, now smiled in grim admiration as he rode after the prince. When Zebek had reached the southern end of the defile, he turned.

"Come ahead," he called in a low voice.

The troops clattered over the rocks, the carts rumbled heavily downhill. A faint glow was rising in the night sky, a dull red glow in the east. As the carts emerged from the pass, the oxen were halted. Men climbed the carts and threw the dried meat to the ground, stacking it in great piles. When little more than half the carts had been emptied, Zebek ordered a halt.

"That's all," he said, "move on."

"But master," Lev whispered, aghast, "the bargain——" Zebek smiled scornfully in the growing light.

"He won't know the difference between one hundred and two hundred carts of meat," he said.

"Nevertheless, lord——"

"And besides," Zebek said, speaking more boldly, "I've been thinking—we'd be fools to pay the whole amount here and now. Then why would he keep his bargain later?"

"Perhaps," Lev said uneasily, "but still——"

"Silence, Jew," cried Zebek, "I know what I'm doing."

Rabdan turned in his saddle, he called toward Zebek in a low voice :

"It's not wise to speak loudly."

"You too!" Zebek shouted, glaring all around with a sudden glitter in his eye. "I'm in command here, move on!"

Silently, the troops and carts moved on. The empty carts rolled easily now, rattling and swaying, followed by the heavier and lumbering loads. South of the ridge, the land sloped more gently, levelling again. Over the land, the misty moonlight spread, reddish and dusty.

When the convoy had travelled several miles to the south, Zebek called another halt.

"Throw the rest of the meat to the ground," he said.

When this was done, the expedition proceeded again. Caution was relaxed now, all felt that danger was past. Soldiers lighted their pipes, talking to one another as they rode. The carts all rattled lightly, the oxen moved easily. Only in the rear, where Gedesu followed with his heavy wagons, was the movement slow. He called piteously after the troops, who sometimes seemed too far away; he cast furtive glances back over his shoulder at the brighter plain. The moon rose high in the sky, the air seemed clear and cool, here in the south. The horses and oxen tried to pause, now and then, to crop hungrily some of the more frequent grass. But the men spurred them on, the sky was already growing pale with the dawn. The eastern sky was crimson, then gold and blue, the sun rose over the land. And in the air, now, the animals smelled fresh green grass and water, and they trotted ahead. In the south, suddenly, trees could be seen distantly, marking the course of the River Chu, the ancient Jaxartes, bordered by green fields and trees. And the men, shouting and laughing, spurred ahead eagerly.

A troop of horsemen rode out to meet them.

They were Turks, clad in white tunics and baggy trousers, wearing red fezzes on their oily black hair, all with great sweeping mustachios and white teeth, all carrying bright curved swords.

Zebek pushed Lev toward them.

"Tell them what we want," he said—"you speak Turki."

Lev rode forward and conversed with the captain of the troop. The captain twisted the ends of his mustachio, smiling intently at Lev while he talked. Then he turned

suddenly, signalling the Torguts to follow, and with Lev he rode back toward the river.

Soon they came to the fields, and the horses trod gratefully on the soft dirt roads between the green and luxuriant gardens. Here and there among the long neat rows of vegetables, a few people at work raised their heads and stared at the strange caravan that had come from the terrible desert in the north. Narrow irrigation canals, running north from the Chu, intersected the fields occasionally. The troops and carts clattered over small wooden bridges, they rode in the cool morning shade of trees. Finally they came to a large stone bridge over the Chu itself.

The caravan road was south of the river, paralleling the easterly course of the Chu. It was an ancient road, and in ancient times it had been well travelled. But in recent times, especially in summer, travel had become light. For even the Chu was drying up slowly, like the streams in the north ; its course had shortened measurably in the last fifty years. Here, however, shaded by leafy trees, the river seemed deep and cool. And on the southern side of the Chu, where the caravan road passed, among the trees, a village, a small white mosque, a caravanseraï could be seen.

It was to the caravanseraï that the Turkish officer led the Torgut troops. The carts halted in the road, the troops rested. A few Moslem children, a few old men appeared, staring at the gaunt and dusty strangers. The Torguts grinned, one of the children smiled shyly in return. A fat woman, heavily veiled, carrying a large bundle of clothes, crossed the road, peering back from under her veil as she went toward the river bank. Norbo grinned and cried out :

“ Ya-hoo ! ”

“ Keep quiet,” Subutai said, smiling a little, “ you’ll get us all in trouble.”

"She's big enough," someone said.

"Not for all," Norbo protested, winking at Tuluku, "I can use most of her myself."

Subutai rode forward.

The caravanserai consisted of a stable, a great courtyard, a hostelry, and a bazaar. A portly Turk with a long beard had come out of the bazaar, into the courtyard. The Turkish captain smiled, he said something in a guttural tongue. Lev stared at the bearded Turk a moment; then he dismounted eagerly from his horse. He and the portly man embraced, they began to speak rapidly in a strange language.

"My Jew!" said Zebek, arching his eyebrows. "He's found a brother, it seems."

Lev and the inn-keeper talked and gesticulated.

"Well, Jew," Zebek said impatiently, "what's he say—what about the water?"

Lev turned and said:

"Master, this is Suliman Beg, he is a rich man."

"Well, ask him about the water."

"We were just talking of water," said Lev, "it's strange. One time our people were crossing a distant land, too; they were being pursued. And they came to a great body of water, the Red Sea."

"Red Sea?" Zebek said, irritably. "What's that got to do with our water, Jew?"

"Why, wise prince," said Lev, "consider this, there was not too little, but too much water. And the Lord God commanded the waters to part, and our people passed through."

"Nonsense," cried Zebek angrily, "get on with the bargain."

"But, master," Lev said, "Suliman Beg wishes to know, if the Lord God helps a good people, why will He not help the Torgut Mongols—are they a bad people, then?"

Suliman Beg stood combing his beard, staring thoughtfully at Zebek. Zebek flushed, and drew his sword.

"Why, I'll skewer him," he cried, "I'll——"

The Turki captain came forward, still smiling, but speaking in a harsh voice.

"He says, master," Lev translated, "control your temper here."

Zebek put back his sword, muttering, scowling arrogantly at Suliman Beg. And the Turki Jew looked back at Zebek indifferently.

"He says, lord," said Lev, after consulting with Suliman—"is there any sign that the Lord God has looked with favour on the Torgut people?"

Zebek's angry face grew blank.

"God is for imbeciles," he muttered, "for women and poor fools."

"That may be, master—Suliman thinks God is good," said Lev. "He wishes to know, then, if there is an instance where the Torgut Mongols have ever done good for the Jews."

Suliman Beg rumbled again, and Lev translated.

"Or the Turks, master—since he's Turki too."

Zebek could think of nothing—he had a mad desire to skewer them all, the Turki Jew, the smiling officer, the Moslem troops. But Suliman Beg, combing his beard, was listening closely to something Lev was saying. Lev was talking passionately now, waving his arms. Suliman Beg let his eyes rove over the Torgut troops in the road beyond the courtyard; and his expression softened, seeing their gaunt faces, their filthy clothes, their weary, feverish eyes. And then he spoke to Lev, softly. When Suliman had finished, Lev turned.

"Ah, master," he said, "it is a good thing, certainly, Suliman Beg is a learned man. He has thought for himself of Ogotai, the son of Genghis Khan. Among the Mongols, master, he says it was written that bathing in a stream

was punished by death. One day Ogotai and his brother, Jagatai, found a Moslem in a stream. Jagatai whipped out his sword, master. But Ogotai cast a golden coin into the water, giving the Moslem an excuse thereby."

Suliman Beg smiled tolerantly, fingers in his beard. Rabdan and Subutai, and the troops near the courtyard, smiled and laughed with relief. Even the Turki captain, who hadn't understood a word of either language being used, threw back his head and laughed heartily, showing his white teeth.

Zebek said, somewhat mollified :

"Very well, Jew—now get on with him about the water."

Lev conversed with Suliman Beg for a moment, and then he turned to Zebek with a shrug.

"But he says, master, he doesn't own the water."

"Who does?"

"The people, lord."

Zebek flushed angrily again.

"Ask him," he cried impatiently, "whether we can get water or not."

Suliman Beg combed his long beard thoughtfully, his eyes focused shrewdly on Gedesu's carts, which were just now being rolled into the courtyard; he suddenly began talking to Lev, pointing to the empty stables, the courtyard, the hostelry, and bazaar.

"What's he say, Jew?"

"Business is poor, master."

"But we'll pay much, tell him that," Zebek said desperately—"ask him, for God's sake, can he get us the water?"

"He says, lord," Lev said, after consulting with Suliman Beg, "all things are possible."

The conference broke up. Suliman Beg looked at the contents of Gedesu's carts, showing a careful interest. He spoke to the Turki captain, at last. The captain smiled, he

commanded his men to follow, he led the way to a large reservoir where the River Chu was dammed. The work of filling the carts began.

The troops worked in shifts, some of them lay under the trees.

The sun rose high, but it seemed fresh and cool by the river. The men rolled in the grass, the horses and oxen gratefully ate the sweet green blades. Rabdan and Subutai sat in the shade and conversed.

"I was wrong, comrade," Rabdan said, "things seem all right."

"The water is good," Subutai said, "it will help us all."

"Impossible to cross the Kurminin Kum, without," said Rabdan. "Ah well, a man thinks of too many things at times."

"Yes, that's so," Subutai said, sighing.

Near the river, too, Gedesu sat. He sat alone, for a time thinking sadly of his wealth, now in the hands of Suliman Beg. All he had received in place of it was Zebek's promise. He sighed deeply, lying back in the shade. . . . Things were more and more difficult, he thought—yet now they should be simpler, since he had little a man could rob. . . . Gedesu slept for a while, and woke refreshed. For a time he lay in the grass, half dreaming, thinking of the days when he had been a boy. He thought of the temple yurts, which had always made him feel strangely, as though he'd wanted to cry, and he thought of the butter gods he used to carve for the altars on Chagan-Sara Eve. Suddenly he shook himself, he raised himself on an elbow and looked where Subutai sat under the trees. For a while he looked at Subutai, wishing curiously that his brother would turn and smile his way. But once, when Subutai seemed to be turning his head, Gedesu spat in the grass and rolled on to his stomach and slept again.

Finally, late in the afternoon, the great tanks of water were filled. Suliman Beg came from his courtyard leading

Gedesu's carts ; he had filled them all with fresh-cut fodder for the hungry unfortunate beasts in the Kurminin Kum.

"It's nothing, it's a small thing to do," he said to Lev.

"It's nice, here," sighed Lev.

"Stay," Suliman said, on a sudden impulse. "Why go on?"

Lev smiled and said :

"Why not?"

"I don't trust that barbarian, that savage," muttered Suliman, glancing ahead at Zebek, who was mounting his horse. "He'll skewer you one of these days."

"Ah, perhaps," said Lev slowly. "But these are my people now, as the Turki are yours."

Suliman frowned, removing his fez and wiping his brow.

"Is there no end to such things?" he said strangely.

But Lev seemed to understand.

"No end," he said softly, "until all people are one."

The troops moved ahead ; the heavy carts lumbered on the road, their sides still wet. The sun was rapidly sinking in the west. The troops and carts rumbled across the bridge over the Chu. A few people stared, a child waved, all seemed quiet and peaceful in the afternoon dusk. The convoy turned east through the fields, passing between the gardens of fresh green leaves. Already in the east the evening star could be seen. The troops turned north, toward the Bak-pak Dala and the Kurminin Kum. . . .

From somewhere behind, from over the river, from somewhere among the fields and trees, came the sound of a strange flute, plaintive and sweet, like a faint voice calling them back. All heard it, all stilled their talk. The flute played on, more faintly, like a part of their lives which they never well knew, which they were leaving behind for ever.

Soon the River Chu, the fields, the trees were left far behind to the south. The sunset glow died in the west, the stars came out. The caravan moved north in the night.

Soon, too, the air became bitter and dry again. A wind blew from the north-east, smelling hot and dusty, clouding the stars. Zebek commanded silence and caution, he peered through the dark air toward the Pole Star.

The oxen plodded more slowly, hauling the heavy carts, smelling the faintly aromatic and alkaline dust in the desert wind. The drivers cracked their long whips desperately, savagely biting the beasts' flanks with the metallic tips, cursing under their breaths at the reluctant oxen. Even the horses reared and shied, trying to twist their heads back to the south.

Zebek, tense and nervous, when the convoy approached the place where the second stack of dried meat had been left, ordered the soldiers to scout widely in the dark until they came to the spot. As time went on and the troops failed to find the meat, Zebek became increasingly nervous, biting his lips and peering through the dark with glittering eyes. Gedesu and Lev rode close behind Zebek ; the cart wheels of the long wagon train creaked drily in the heat at their backs. . . . It was a relief to Zebek when the troops closed in again, silently in the dark, reporting that the meat had been found at last. But Lev, licking the bitter dust from his lips, whispered nervously :

"Master, when one part of a bargain is broken, likely both sides are broken——"

"Silence, Jew," Zebek whispered harshly. "No bargain is broken, it's merely placed in two halves——"

"God save us now," muttered Lev, raising his eyes to the dark sky.

Zebek called Rabdan and Subutai to his side.

"To the east," he whispered, "there is a small pass, unknown to the Kirghiz, should they be near."

Rabdan looked at him sharply, trying to see his face in the gloom. He said :

"How do you know this, then ?"

"The Lama Loosang," said Zebek, wetting his lips, "he

has maps from the Dalai Lama, from the learned men of Tibet."

"Ah well," muttered Rabdan, "then what?"

"Then it is better," said Zebek, "that the water-carts pass safely beyond the ridge, no matter what else."

"And so?" said Subutai.

"Take the troops," whispered Zebek, "and go through the pass where the first meat was left. If the meat is gone, all is well. Leave this message there, for the Kirghiz chieftain Beran," he said, handing Subutai a small parchment map on which he had indicated the location of the second hundred loads of meat. "Then go through the pass and rejoin us north of the ridge, in the east."

Subutai took the parchment and fingered it uneasily a moment. Rabdan, reluctant and sombre, said at last :

"But it's bad, leaving the water-carts without guard."

"The fewer men with the carts, the less chance for mistake," Zebek whispered fiercely. "I'm in command, my plan is best!"

He trembled with anger, his eyes glittered, staring at Rabdan in the faint starlight. Slowly and morosely, Rabdan wheeled his horse.

Zebek watched Subutai and Rabdan ride away, he listened to the two hundred Torgut horsemen ride softly off to the north. . . . Then he slapped his thigh, like a man who has forgotten something, turning suddenly on Lev.

"Go with the troops, Jew!" he whispered harshly. "You too!" he said to Gedesu.

"Master, my place is with you," Lev said quietly.

"And mine with the drivers, noble benefactor!" whined Gedesu, cringing and terrified.

Already it was too late; sight and sound of the Torgut riders had been lost. Zebek muttered angrily, he rode toward the head of the wagon train, ordering the drivers to crack their long whips.

"And silence, no pipes!" he whispered to each driver, tensely. "The first man makes a sound, I'll cut him to bits, understand?"

Lev followed closely after Zebek, Gedesu rode coweringly among the drivers and carts. The oxen hauled the heavy loads toward the east, following the ridge in the dark, travelling on a steady slant along the gentle slope toward the place where, somewhere in the east, the unknown pass would be found.

Zebek rode ahead, nervous and tense, peering through the dusty star-gloom for the pass known only to the Dalai Lama, or to his chief prelate among the Torgut people, the Lama Loosang. And as time passed and no break in the ridge was found, drops of sweat broke out on Zebek's tight forehead, feeling chill as they dried in the hot dark air. Now he rode frantically ahead, his horse clattering over the rocks, searching far ahead for a place where the carts could pass.

Behind him the drivers savagely cracked their whips, the carts tilted a little on the sloping ground at the foot of the ridge, water spilled from beneath the felt covers of the swaying tanks.

Zebek turned back, thinking desperately that he must have missed the pass in the dark. At that instant, from far in the west came the faint but clear sound of shots, of wild and sudden battle-cries. With a hoarse shout, Zebek cried out for the drivers to force the oxen straight over the ridge. In the west, the distant shouts became more fierce. . . .

Rabdan and Subutai had approached the pass quietly. The meat was gone, all seemed well. Subutai searched in the dark for a rock, a stone, where he might leave the map for Beran. The night air was stifling, black and still, except for the whispering of the hot wind. Rabdan and the men guided their horses cautiously up over the dark rocks of the pass.

Suddenly, fanatical shouts burst on all sides.

"We're betrayed!" cried Rabdan.

The Kirghiz and Bashkirs burst from ambush, shouting like madmen, hurling lances, whirling great swords, firing shots from the muskets the Russ had given them at Fort Orenburg on the Turgai, far away. Rabdan rallied his men, frantic and bitter, he sought to hold the pass against the savages. In the dark and rocky defile it was difficult now to distinguish friend from foe. Horses screamed, men shouted and cried in agony, the Kirghiz and Bashkirs shrieked their battle-cries. Only by their mad and fanatic shouts could the Torguts know, surely, which of the swarming men were enemies. Subutai and his riders pressed forward, toward Rabdan, into the thick of the desperate fray. Horses lunged, wild and riderless, down over the broken rocks. The defile became choked with the dead. Nearly three hundred Kirghiz and Bashkirs were killed, before the last small band of them fled toward the east, along the northern slope of the ridge. . . .

The red moon was rising again in the east, from the heart of the Kurminin Kum. In the ghastly light, Subutai looked on the dead. Of the Torgut troops, only Norbo and Tuluku and a few others remained. In the crimson moonlight, Rabdan lay dying.

"Betrayed," he gasped weakly to Subutai, "don't let him betray—people——"

He choked, blood streamed from his mouth.

"Djungaria!" he said, and he died.

Subutai turned away, heavily. Silently he looked at the few men remaining of all the Torgut troops. Without a word, sombrely, the small band wheeled their horses among the dead, riding back through the pass and east at the southern foot of the slope. All Subutai could think, all that remained to hope—the water-carts had been saved; he and the few men left would make their last effort to save the carts. . . . And he urged his horse faster, where

the wagon train had gone, followed by his handful of weary and blood-stained men.

But the water-carts were already lost.

A second large band of Kirghiz, led by Beran himself, had suddenly appeared on the eastern ridge. . . .

The oxen, lashed by the drivers, were trying frantically to haul the great carts up the steep slope. Water spilled, pouring down over the hot dry rocks and sand ; carts lurched and overturned. Zebek heard the fierce and distant fighting, he turned and shouted savagely at the men to goad the clumsy oxen.

The red moon rose in the east, at first only Beran appeared. He hesitated some distance away, trying to peer down the slope still dark.

Zebek stopped, tensely, seizing his sword.

"You broke your bargain," Beran said at last, gutturally speaking in Russian.

"I broke no bargain !" Zebek cried. "The meat is there—a map has been left——"

For answer, Beran laughed harshly.

"You thought to trick me," he said, "coming east with the carts——"

"But the carts," cried Zebek frantically, "you promised the carts should pass——"

"Neither men nor carts," said Beran.

Zebek flushed angrily. Seizing his sword tightly, he dashed toward the chieftain Beran.

But Beran called out a command in Kirghiz. A swarm of riders suddenly appeared on the ridge, shouting fanatically in the brighter moonlight. Zebek cried in rage ; he turned and dashed eastward over the ridge, followed by Lev. A few of the Kirghiz wheeled in pursuit. But the Torgut horses flew far ahead down the northern slope, levelling out on the plain. And most of the Kirghiz swarmed down the southern slope among the oxen. The beasts turned in panic, stumbling and falling. Carts overturned, water

spilled down over the bitter rocks. The Kirghiz pursued the drivers, slaughtering those they caught. Shouting like madmen, they slaughtered the oxen too, tumbling whatever carts remained upright, laughing with wild vengeance as the water spilled down like blood in the dim red moonlight.

Beran caught sight of Gedesu, fleeing south—he saw the glint of chain-mail on the unfortunate man. His lips, like a savage smile, drew back tightly over his teeth. And raising his long and tasselled lance, he dashed after Gedesu.

Gedesu turned at last, in the lonely desert, in the moonlight, facing the Kirghiz Beran. Pitifully, yet with a strange and hopeless dignity, he drew his sword. Knowing he was about to die, he waited with a curious calm, trying to recall some cry of Torgut bravery. And in that moment, spearing the words that rose like a forgotten spirit in Gedesu's throat, Beran's lance burst his neck asunder.

Beran turned the fallen Torgut with his foot. He stripped his chain-mail from the fat, quivering body of Gedesu. Gedesu lay with his face to the red moon, his mouth still open with his unspoken words. Beran prodded the belly of the man with the long wooden heel of his boot, bracing himself; and then, having stripped Gedesu, holding the armour on the end of his retrieved lance, Beran rode back toward the ridge.

Subutai, approaching from the west, saw Beran with the glittering trophy on his lance. He halted his small band of men at a distance. He stared at the chain-mail, glittering like a coat of rubies in the strange moonlight. A sad, curious look came over his face. On the slope, still distant, he saw the swarm of wild and shouting Kirghiz, still slaughtering the beasts, still spilling the carts on the glinting rocks. . . . Then quietly, Subutai led his haggard and bitter men toward the west, crossing the ridge where sombre shadows fell, riding at a steady and melancholy trot to the

north, deeper into the Bak-pak Dala, toward the Torgut horde, toward the edge of the Kurminin Kum.

The air became hotter, sand blew in clouds, on squalls of wind, the sky was obscured.

Ahead, in a clear moment, a distant light appeared, burning steadily. The riders slowed, walking their horses silently, bitter and reluctant to approach the horde. A wind blew again, hot and savage, filled with sand. The riders choked, they nearly collided with two horsemen who had paused not far from the inner sentry line of the horde. Subutai muttered a question ; one of the men turned, and Subutai saw it was Zebek.

"What can I tell them?" Zebek said.

There were tears glittering in his eyes. Perhaps it was from the hot dust, perhaps from emotion—perhaps they were tears of anger. Subutai had never seen Zebek thus, his lips quivering and his face so pitiful and pleading. . . . He ground his teeth, moved strongly by Zebek's plight. The prince kept saying, over and over again :

"What can I say? What shall I tell them, then?"

"The truth," said Subutai.

"But the carts, the water-carts——"

"Tell them the truth."

The wind died for a moment, the air cleared, the moon shone down. Someone shouted, someone came running. Dogs barked, people shouted. Lights flared in the near-by hoshuns, a crowd of people began to appear.

"Wait," Zebek called frantically to Subutai—"perhaps we can go back, there was a mistake——"

"Nothing returns," said Subutai, riding to meet the people.

Zebek spurred after him, followed by Lev.

"But wait, a mistake!" Zebek cried frantically. "The Lama Loosang lied——"

His eyes gleamed, he clutched at Subutai.

Subutai shook Zebek's hand from his arm contemptuously.

His own eyes glittered as he turned on the prince. He laughed savagely.

A curious change came over Zebek, then. The skin on his face grew tight and pale. . . . His eyes flashed, he suddenly slapped his thigh.

The people swarmed around the haggard and bloody riders, shouting.

“ Ah god, water ! ”

“ At last ! ”

“ Water ! ” they cried hysterically. “ Water ! ”

They peered all about, peering beyond the few riders on the moonlit plain ; then they grew puzzled and frightened.

“ But the carts, the troops ? ”

“ Ask Zebek,” muttered Subutai, guiding his horse through the increasing and frantic crowd. Now the people clutched angrily at the riders, shouting hysterically—their cries became threatening as the truth grew clear. Someone almost pulled Subutai from his horse. He laughed savagely and turned, shouting back over the crowd : “ Zebek—ask Zebek——”

The people pressed toward Zebek, clamouring. He raised his hand, he rose high in his stirrups. His face was bitter and cold again.

“ We were betrayed ! ” he cried hoarsely. “ Betrayed by yonder dog, the Jew——”

Now the people eddied toward Lev, surrounding him, their cries swelling ominously like a mad and savage wind.

For a moment, over the bobbing heads of the crazed people, Subutai could see Lev, still sitting on his horse, blinking and peering down his great nose at the people clutching his legs, his arms thrown wide, like a man about to embrace a friend.

“ O sad people, O my brothers ! ” he cried.

And then he disappeared.

Subutai cursed, he wheeled his horse and drove savagely through the crowd. The people were snarling like animals.

ripping the clothes from Lev, hurling knives, tearing at him like beasts. Subutai shouted like a madman, too, trampling people under his horse, shouting hoarsely :

“ Zebek—the betrayer is Zebek, fools ! ”

But Zebek, sitting his horse with his arms folded, stared back at Subutai with mad bright eyes.

“ Subutai too ! ” the prince cried then, his tight face twitching in the strange red moonlight. “ Subutai—the Cossack-lover ! the lover of Jews——”

And the people turned, snarling and screaming at Subutai like mad and ravenous dogs. And Subutai, among his own people, himself snarling, his own face twisted savagely as the rest, fled for his life.

CHAPTER NINE



When the tragic outcome of Zebek's expedition became known, the Torgut people, who had counted desperately on water from the Chu, were stunned—like people from whom all human life, all reason had fled.

For seven months they had been travelling steadily, with the exception of brief halts at the Emba, the Turgai, and the Sary Su ; they had come nearly two thousand miles from the Volga.

Great distances, much time, many difficulties, all had been added to the tragic migration because none of the Torgut leaders had dared to say, from the very start, that Djungaria was their ultimate goal. Erratically, like men with short and faulty vision, the leaders had wandered with their homeless people in many false and troublous directions.

Across the deep snow of hill and plain, through the floods of spring, the marsh, over rivers and desert-lands, the Torguts had somehow come.

Thus far, the hope of freedom had sustained them.

Just as they fled from the oppression of the Tsarina and Cossack forts, so they sought freedom—geographically. It existed apart from themselves, they felt—a promised land waiting their arrival, somewhere east—the home of the sun, where morning began, the dawn-blue lands where men had one time been free.

Yet they had escaped from the land of bondage, they had come this far to the heart of the great Asian desert.

And still the shadow of oppression lay over them—the savage Moslem fanatics, whom the Tsarina had set in motion, like a dark cloud pursuing them—and the sun still rose distant as ever, in the east, from the morning lands always beyond their reach, elusive as a mirage.

The people, scattered with their carts and animals over a vast area of the desolate Bak-pak Dala, muttered bitterly among themselves.

Someone had betrayed the Torgut soldiers and the train of water-carts. The Jew Lev Zolotsky had been murdered by the people of Zebek's ulus. Yet from what Norbo and the survivors of the ill-fated expedition could tell—and their tales spread like wild-fire through all five thousand hoshuns of the horde—it seemed clear that Lev was innocent. Zebek sulked in his tent, a broken and changed man. Even the people of his own ulus—shame-faced at what they had done, once their savage hysteria had passed—looked with fear and sullen suspicion at the tent where the dark and brooding prince sat alone. Through the horde crept a bitter rumour that Zebek—whom all had viewed as their saviour, only a few days before—was the real betrayer, who had been, somehow, betrayed in his turn.

Yet only Subutai could say, for sure.

And Subutai kept his thought to himself. With cold and furious contempt he thought of Zebek; but he remembered, too, how he had fled for his life from the people.

Was there truth or justice anywhere in the world? The people seemed treacherous as the prince. It was terrifying, to think that there were people among the Torguts themselves—some of the princes and priests—who would just as soon betray their people to Kirghiz or Russians—or Chinese, perhaps—just so they themselves might gain somewhat, in power or wealth.

This thought haunted Subutai.

Where could freedom be, then, when oppressors lurked in their own midst, willing to utilize against the Torguts the dark and hovering shadows which, perhaps, they themselves had helped to call into being?

To Subutai it grew more clear, that freedom was not a particular land, any more than oppression was a place—but that freedom lay in a condition, a free relationship among the Torguts themselves. Yet just as no man could be free, without animals, or without land for his animals—as Ubasha had one time said—so no man could be free without water—no man could even live. Was freedom, then, simple as water, which all men required in nearly similar parts, which no man should have the power to withhold?

Little water remained in those carts which had not been lost at the River Chu. North and south of the horde, and in the west, lurking in the deserts of the Bak-pak Dala beyond the far-flung camps of the Torgut people, were the Kirghiz and Bashkir savages. Ahead lay the Kurminin Kum, the fierce heart of the desert; in the east, somewhere beyond the Kurminin Kum, was water. . . .

Nothing had been gained by Lev's death.

Nothing could be gained by accusing Zebek—not for the time, at least.

Water, as freedom had seemed, lay to the east. And perhaps—thought Subutai—when the people had found water, when their parched faces seemed human again, then, perhaps, they might find freedom among themselves. . . .

On the edge of the Kurminin Kum, under a blazing sun, the Torguts were waiting. It was August 5, 1771—the beginning of the eighth month of their migration from the Volga.

The desert stretched, lifeless and burned, far beyond the shimmering horizon. The sides of the great round water-carts were dry and warped in the dusty sunlight.

The herds and flocks, once vast and well-fed, were scattered over the grassless miles of sand and rock. A curious glaze had come over the restless eyes of the gaunt beasts. It was much the same with the people, whose clothing was torn and covered with dust. All were thin and haggard, with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes—their eyes, like those of the animals, were covered with a veil of despair.

The sun rose higher. A great cloud of dust and sand blew over the eastern horizon, obscuring the sun. The whole sky was shadowed, yet the air seemed hotter than before ; behind the veil of dust the sun blazed, and here and there it filtered through the clouds in long streaks like dazzling lances hurled down at the ruined earth.

People and beasts turned their glazed and tortured eyes upward, seeing the great clouds rolling from the east. Over the flat gravel waste-lands, the long ridges of blown sand and dunes, the rocks and great dry lake-beds crusted with salt and shell-dust, over miles and miles of the shadowed earth as far as the eye could see, the Torgut people waited. Men and beasts stirred and murmured, turning their eyes to the sky—as though from the clouds of dust, water might somehow fall.

Yet the clouds passed overhead, rolling mountainously over the desert lands, and nothing fell but dust.

Then a silence ensued, terrible in its vastness of stunned people and beasts spread mightily over the dust-covered land and all the millions, the living people and animals, all so silent, so motionless, like death.

Ubasha and the generals, spurring the troops, tried to lead the great army of carts and animals forward. A vanguard of four thousand soldiers rode ahead, into the blazing dust that was thinning, now, in the east. And along the northern and southern flanks of the Torgut horde, nearly fifty miles apart, other troops stirred and moved forward in companies, each spaced a mile apart for fifty miles. As these flanking companies rode eastward,

they began narrowing toward one another from north and south, like a broad wedge behind the vanguard, trying to force the people and animals between them into compact and moving columns.

Animals lumbered sullenly out of the way of the troops, people guided their carts lethargically a few miles closer to the central aimaks ; yet then they paused again, motionless and silent, gazing into space with their dull and viscous eyes.

From the distant rear of the horde, troops of soldiers pressed forward, too—yet with the same result. The people and animals seemed lost in a deep sleep, thoughtless, motionless, under the sun-drenched dust of the desert sky.

And then in the east, where the clouds had risen, where a veil of dust still lingered above the shimmering horizon that circled these vast ruins of earth, there in the sky the people saw a mirage take shape.

Groves of green trees rose magically in the air and blossomed, and among the trees there appeared white domes and castles, and at the foot of the beautiful scene a great blue sea of water washed cool and sweet in the dusty air.

And when they saw these things, the beasts and people with their burned eyes turned to the east. From a million throats came a mighty cry of hope—a choked cry from humans and beasts, alike, sweeping in a great wave from the massed and motionless creatures.

The image lingered a few moments in the air, like a real but infinitely distant scene, slowly veiled by dust again. The animals bellowed and clamoured, the people uttered hoarse shouts. And then suddenly, surging toward the east, where the trees and water had been seen, the whole blinded and sun-maddened host of Torgut hoshuns now burst their way. . . .

No water was found, neither that day nor any other

during the next three weeks. Sun blinded their eyes, dust burned their throats. From August 5, for twenty days, the Torgut horde, no longer pausing for day or dark, fled east in a mad and disorderly mass.

Each morning the sun rose, like a ball of red flames in the east. The wind blew, sometimes a whirlwind whipped the sand over the desert in great spinning clouds—fantastic shapes, towering in the sky, that stalked and circled the horde like baleful giants, assuming, at times, the false and gentle appearance of whirling flowers.

And sometimes when the air was still, when the far-away horizon was only a shimmering haze, then vast and pale images rose in the sky. Mirages of mountainous peaks, white towers, turrets of dimly sparkling ice, these, and vast cool lakes with grassy islands appeared, viewed with desperate hope by the unhappy people.

The eastern mirages, like the hope they placed in Djungaria, lured the people over the heartless land. They raised their faces to the sky, stumbling over the burning sands, clinging with their last vision to the pastel images until night or blowing sand obscured the illusion. And then they stumbled ahead through the dark, among the whirling giants of sand and the black winds of nightfall, not pausing for rest, unable to stop, like the creatures of an endless nightmare.

Later and later each night the moon rose, waning, until it hung over their heads like a curved red sword. Each night, too, the Kirghiz and their Bashkir allies attacked and plundered the horde.

The Torgut troops could do little. The people and animals were scattered widely over the desert. All semblance of military order was lost.

Hoshuns wandered off by themselves, seeking water and grass that was only an illusion in the sky, always beyond reach, that evanesced or retreated. And in the night, often, for many miles the distant anguish of these

people might be heard, suffering the slaughter that pursued, that always lurked just beyond the borders of the horde.

People seemed no longer to hear these sad and frantic cries. Sometimes they heard, and their faces twitched. But they stumbled ahead like people preoccupied with a fixed vision, a single idea of their own.

When beasts stumbled and fell, exhausted, they were left behind. Carts were abandoned, dead animals lay yoked to the deserted loads. Sand blew in mournful mounds over the oxen and against the wooden wheels.

All who loitered, all who straggled too far north or south of the horde, the Bashkirs and Kirghiz killed. People died, others gazed at them strangely with blind eyes. Nobody stopped but the dead.

The troops, weary and desperate as the people, were unable to protect the Torgut horde or to hold it in proper order.

Only the burning vision of the sun each dawn, only the mirages that retreated each day, only a fixed and single vision—the waters of Lake Balkasch, and the River Ili that flowed down from the valleys of Djungaria—these things alone kept the people travelling in a general easterly direction.

And in their disorder, pursued and harried by Kirghiz, the Torguts seemed driven like a herd of goaded animals—so that it seemed whatever semblance of order they kept, whatever identity as a horde, this came only from the swarms of savages who stung and bit at their flanks whenever they slowed or straggled.

No water remained for the animals, there was not enough for the people themselves. Carts that still contained water were guarded fanatically. While the water lasted, a basis remained for some control of the horde by the authorities, particularly by the shulengas of the hoshuns. The shulengas allowed each person a decreasing portion of water each

day, barely enough to keep the worst ravages of thirst in check. Skin and lips became burnt and cracked. But while the water lasted, the people, although they muttered hysterically, clustered around the water-carts and waited their turns when the shulengas ordered a brief halt each day at dusk.

As the Torguts went deeper into the waterless desert of the Kurminin Kum, the Kirghiz and Bashkir pursuers fared little better. Formerly they had ridden off to the north or south great distances each day to refill their water jugs. But now this was impossible—they were trapped in the same arid wastes as those they pursued. Their only recourse was to plunder the Torgut water-carts.

At first, they had stopped to gorge on each dead animal in the wake of the Torguts, to plunder the contents of abandoned carts, to pilfer the clothing of the dead. But as they followed the Torguts to the heart of the desert, they too began abandoning all they had plundered and saved. The trampled sand over which the Torguts and Kirghiz had passed was littered with a tragic debris of dead and deserted things. No wolves or jackals howled in the night, no vultures hovered in the hot air. In the Kurminin Kum, there was not enough moisture for even the lizards and snakes.

The Kirghiz became crazed as the Torguts by heat and thirst. They rode closer and closer to the horde, hysterically, as though they too were being pursued. They ceased to pause, now, for dead beasts or plunder. No water-carts were abandoned. The Kirghiz made bolder and more dangerous forays, deeper into the horde, seeking water.

For the possession of their water-carts, even the old Torgut men and the women put up fierce battles. Armed with butchering knives and hunting clubs, they snarled and struck at their enemies. Dogs came running silently from all sides, rarely barking these days, leaping ferociously to snap at the ham-strings of Kirghiz horses—or, in the

case of the hunting dogs, at the very throats of the riders themselves. And in many such battles the Torguts, although at great cost to themselves, sent the Kirghiz fleeing.

The troops went where they could—no unified command seemed possible under the circumstances.

On one occasion, at dusk on the fourteenth day of crossing the Kurminin Kum, Subutai and a company of riders were far in the south, near the ulus of Zebek-Dordzhi.

That dusk, when the pause was made for doling out nearly the last of the water, a band of Kirghiz marauders had suddenly attacked one of the hoshuns of Zebek's ulus. The people had held off the savages, shouting fiercely, forming a human wall around the water-cart.

When Subutai and his troops appeared, the Kirghiz fled. Into the darkness of the desert Subutai pursued them, until he feared to follow further.

Here he paused, on the south-western flank of the horde—and here Ghashun suddenly appeared.

She had, perhaps, seen Subutai when he and the troops arrived; she had ridden swift as a man in the wake of the Torgut warriors. Now in the dark and silence, as though by instinct, she came near Subutai and touched his hand.

Subutai growled a question, and then he struck his flint.

He found himself peering into the dry mad eyes of his sister-in-law, Ghashun. She clung to his hand and said in a curiously mild and sing-song voice :

"Now, O Subutai, now it is right to wife with Ghashun—for when a man dies, then his brother may take his wife and his goods."

Subutai tried to turn away. But she held his hand tightly and muttered in a low voice :

"Take me as second wife, Subutai—take me as slave!" she leaned toward him and suddenly whispered: "With

my wealth buy Cedar-chab, Subutai—gladly will I be second wife to Cedar-chab——”

Bitterly, Subutai pressed his burnt lips together.

“O Subutai!” she implored then. “Speak—blame me for all I have done—cover my head with curses! shower me with abuse! do what you will—but speak!”

And when Subutai still remained silent, she sobbed convulsively and suddenly bit his hand. She sank her teeth into the dry hard flesh of his fingers, moaning hysterically, she beat him with her fists. Subutai, a gloomy and savage man these days, torn between pity and hate, ground his teeth and endured the pain. Finally her hysteria seemed to lessen; she loosened his hand, seeing that he couldn't be goaded to speak or act. And then suddenly she reached toward him in the dark and seized his dagger.

She had already torn through her gown and pierced her flesh when he recovered the dagger from her hysterical clutch. For a moment she sat panting heavily in the dark, moaning as she breathed. And then without warning, with only a shuddering sigh, she spurred her horse and dashed off over the western sands.

Subutai roused himself, he was about to start after her. But Norbo, who had been waiting near-by with the troops, came forward and seized his arm.

“Don't be silly,” he said. “Man, she's sick in the head! Let one of the Kirghiz slit her guts.”

“Psst!” said Tuluku. “Somebody coming!”

It was Merghen, riding from the east. He was out of breath.

“Anybody seen Ghashun?” he said.

“Yes, she was just here,” Tuluku said.

“Where's Subutai, is he here?” said Merghen. “A man can't see his nose, in this kind of air——”

“Here,” said Subutai. “What's the matter?”

“She got away,” Merghen muttered. “I've been trying to keep her quiet, especially since Gedesu——”

"Listen," said Norbo, "we've got enough trouble, without running after a crazy woman——"

"Man, but she's changed!" Merghen said excitedly. "She's got nobody now—nothing—especially since Zebek took all the animals——"

"What!" cried Subutai.

"Yes; here she was just offering Subutai all the family wealth," said Norbo.

Merghen laughed harshly.

"She's got nothing except her clothes," he said. "Not even the horse she's riding is hers——"

Subutai wheeled his horse abruptly.

"Come on," he said to the men.

Pressing his dry lips together again, Subutai led the way over the dark sand. In the gloom it was hard to see anything. Subutai and the man called her name, there was no answer.

"She's probably too far away," said Norbo.

"She couldn't have gone far," said Tuluku. "I swear, I listened and heard the horse stop not far away."

It was Merghen who found her. She had been pitched from the horse, her head had cracked against a rock in the sand. She lay sprawled with her fists open and empty.

Subutai looked down, muttering to himself.

"I'd have seen to it that you wanted for nothing, Ghashun," he murmured. "If I'd known, I swear, it might have been different——"

"Well, she's dead," Norbo said, "no use standing around."

In the star gloom, Subutai still looked down. There had been things between him and Ghashun that none but themselves could know—things that had made him feel shame and anguish for the first time in his life. But now she was dead. It was like a part of his life that was ended—even more than his brother Gedesu's death had

symbolized—a part of his life he had failed to deal with properly, somehow.

“She was a woman,” he muttered, “a human being.”

“More where she came from,” Norbo said. “Better ones, too.”

It was Subutai, riding slowly, who found her horse. The poor beast had broken a leg, it whinnied pathetically when he stopped. He killed the horse with the dagger Ghashun had tried to drive into her breast.

On the way back to the horde, he thought of these things. Somehow he had failed, somewhere he had made a mistake. It was as though he'd never thought of Ghashun and Gedesu—no matter what else they might have been—as human beings. It seemed to him, then, in one sudden and illuminating moment of vision, that he held a key to understanding Ubasha and Zebek and all the people. Their enmities, their troubles, all seemed to come from a point of view whereby personal wealth, like the great whirling dervishes of blown sand, obscured not only the blue sky but the identity of themselves as human beings. . . . And then a hot wind blew, scorching his eyes with sand—and he and the troops groped their way back to the horde in the black night.

Through the night, the Torguts travelled east with their faces bent before the hot dark wind. Morning came at last, the dawn of August 20, the fifteenth day on the Kurminin Kum. On that day, the water supply in most of the carts was exhausted.

Nobody believed the shulengas when, at dusk, it was announced in many hoshuns that the last water was gone. The people stared angrily at the shulengas. They pressed more closely around the water-carts, clamouring ominously.

“What's this, now!” one shouted to another, pointing to the frightened shulengas. “He's trying to save the last for himself!”

"Water, for god's sake!" people gasped, clutching with shrivelled hands at the shulenga. "Give us the last of it now—it won't matter about to-morrow. . . ."

"It's gone!" cried the shulenga frantically. "There's no more, I swear on the Bichik—go back to your animals—let go, for god's sake! go back!"

People pulled the shulenga from his horse. They shouted:

"He's lying, kill the shulenga! take the water ourselves!"

The shulenga lay trampled underfoot. Only when the shulenga was silent, thus, gone from sight, only then did the people think to look in the water-carts. For a moment, in the dusk, they stared at the great round sides of the tank. Then those who were nearest the cart climbed up, they peered inside. The people began to shout excitedly, now that they realized the water-cart was theirs.

"Here, I'm first! I've got two babies dying——"

"Each in turn! everyone needs water, you're no exception——"

"Divide all the water, let each take his own share——"

But now the people on the cart were climbing down, angrily. One of them croaked:

"He was right—it's empty——"

"We've been cheated!"

"Now what?" all cried.

They stared incredulously at the water-cart, silent and stunned for a moment. And then with cries of rage they surged forward. They overturned the great empty cart, they pounded and burst its dry sides with hunting clubs. They tore at the planks madly until nothing was left of the cart but splinters and chips. Only then, when the cart had been destroyed, then in the faint remaining light they became quiet, staring at one another with strange eyes, slinking away in the dark. . . .

Thus, in many of the hoshuns, were the shulengas beaten or killed and the empty water-carts destroyed. Civil

authority was thereby overturned, the last symbol of migratory order was burst. Yet nothing was gained, there was nothing the people could do. On four sides the desert lay—and on three sides the Kirghiz rode like the herdsmen of death. . . . There was only one way to go, one path of escape—to the east.

The people had one last hope. They raised their burnt faces to the sky, their lips moved soundlessly. They prayed for rain.

The sand giants rose and whirled more hotly. The sun, even the new and waxing moon, moved like fire-balls overhead in the dry and dusty sky.

The people implored the priests, the wizards for aid.

The shaman conjurers put on their coats of leather and iron, their stoat-skin cloaks, their girdles and brass balls, their iron boots and their helmets with sparkling drops of glass.

Bagha the Shaman filled an iron bowl with stones and sand. He poured a few drops of precious water into the bowl. He chanted a magical imprecation to Otshir-bani, the god of rain, and tossed the iron bowl toward the east.

The Torgut shamans shouted and danced madly with a clatter of iron, a jangling of brass, a tinkle of glass beads, a frantic beating of great drums, spinning like the giant whirlwinds of sand.

Overhead the burning sun seemed to dance crazily, shimmering in the sky, like a great red wick blazing in the wind.

The Red-Hat lamas cast their astrological dice, throwing the dice until sacred numbers reappeared several times. Then they announced, shaking their mitred heads, that there was no rain in the Kurminin Kum. . . . It would rain soon, they said, in Tibet.

The sun, the moon rolled steadily, balefully to the west, over an increasing wake of beasts, of carts, of people, all

quiet and lifeless in the sand that blew and covered them slowly.

The people pleaded with Loosang, the chief lama of the Torgut Mongols, for a final desperate prayer.

Loosang fingered his beads of yellow wood from the pebul tree, his white rosary of conch-shells, one of coral and turquoise, of discs from human skulls, of jet-black nuts from the lun-tan tree of the Himalayas, of elephant concretions, of the vertebrae of snakes. Sand-chab was dying of burning lungs, the people were dying of thirst. Loosang raised his eyes to the blazing sky, he looked at the dry haze of heat encircling the horizon. He cast his eyes down, pocketing his beads and folding his hands inside the broad silk sleeves of his yellow gown.

He shook his head, refusing to intercede.

"God's will," he murmured.

In the wooden cart which the Cossack Michailov had brought her one night in the marshes north of Lake Chalk-har, Sand-chab lay dying. The cart ground over the sand ; crimson foam bubbled from her lips when the oxen lurched. One time she opened her glittering eyes and whispered to Cedar-chab, wonderingly :

"This must be death, sister, but where is he ?"

She coughed, her lungs seemed on fire. Her eyes closed.

"Ah, but he was always late," she muttered, "always busy with schemes——"

She suddenly sat upright, her eyes blazing in the darkened heat of the covered cart. She said :

"Yes—perhaps he's planning rain, this very moment ! You'll see, sister—never fear, he'll come !"

She coughed again, blood trickled down her chin.

"Ah God, sister," cried Cedar-chab then, "lie down, rest ! Soon we'll be there—soon you'll be happy again. . . ."

Sand-chab lay back with her eyes closed. Once more she smiled a little and murmured :

"Yes . . . with a red sash and my jade bracelets . . . like I wore when I danced the Russian waltz at Jenat—he'll like it. . . ."

Cedar-chab stroked the dry, hot forehead, she wiped her sister's lips. The cart jolted on. Cedar-chab thought her heart would burst, with Subutai gone and Sand-chab dying.

The afternoon passed, dusk came without coolness.

Sand-chab twisted in a delirious fever, she moaned :

"Loosang, where is he, why does he wait ?"

But it was the shaman, Bagha, who came with a poultice of leaves and a peaceful draught of herbs to help her die. He climbed into the creaking cart and ministered to the woman.

Cedar-chab sobbed bitterly, no tears fell from her eyes.

Her sister died quietly at last. Bagha said in a low voice :

"She was better than she seemed."

Suddenly Cedar-chab leaped to her feet, she tried to fling herself from the cart. Bagha stood in the way. She began to beat at the wooden sides, like a caged creature trying to escape her circumstance, she tore at the felt roof of the cart.

Finally Bagha caught her in his strong thin arms.

"Soon you'll meet him again," murmured the kindly conjurer, in a far-away voice—"for all things come to pass, in their own time."

Slowly she became quiet ; yet over her head the wizard peered with a sad and tender smile—as though he saw other things, too, in the dark.

August 22 passed, and the 23rd. The sand, the sun burned relentlessly as ever. People died in lonely agony, few animals were left of all the herds and flocks. The Kirghiz and Bashkirs became desperate as those they pursued. Torgut soldiers abandoned their Russian muskets.

Powder and shot were gone, the weapons were cumbrous. A few muskets were kept, used as clubs in close fighting. Many of the Torgut warriors died of exhaustion and thirst. The milk of their sturdy mares ran bitter and thin and then ceased flowing. The veins of the horses were opened, soldiers drank the blood of their weakened beasts. Many of the horses died, they fell in the sand with pleading eyes. Often the soldiers refused to obey commands ; they dashed off in aimless hysteria, shaking their weapons fiercely at the red and relentless sun.

Ubasha saw the destruction of his horde, the agony and disintegration of his people. His eyes burned with a last glitter of reason, he went desperately to the Lama Loosang.

"The people no longer listen," he said. "None listen to me—none to Zebek, or other princes. Nor do the soldiers heed the generals, or those in command. Yesterday the Saissang Choktu was killed—some say by Kirghiz," Ubasha said hoarsely—"but others say by his own men. . . . Have all gone mad, are we deserted by God?"

Loosang raised his eyes to the burning sky, as though in meditation, and then he lowered his eyes humbly.

"God is not yet ready to intercede," he said softly.

"Let the voice of God speak out!" the khan cried desperately. "The people will hear—only the voice of God can bring order and hope among us again."

The Lama Loosang opened his eyes narrowly.

"How can God promise," he murmured, "what He cannot fulfil?"

Ubasha stared at the chief priest of the Torguts. His eyes burned in his hollow face.

"Then can nothing save us?" he cried bitterly—"can the voice of God be silent, only the voice of madness heard?"

The Lama Loosang lowered his eyes again.

"God's will," he murmured. . . .

The sky was a metal bowl, the sun like a blazing wick.

No order remained in the horde. No voice of authority was heard, no sign of hope appeared. People and animals could only try to save themselves. Among the Kirghiz and Bashkirs it was much the same. Only the savage sun was in command, only the torture of thirst, the lash of the towering herdsmen of whirling sand, only the anarchy of a red moon ruled the Kurminin Kum.

Dogs went mad, dashing in savage packs through the horde and far off over the desert, disappearing in clouds of dust. Some tore and ravaged the fallen beasts, plunging their mad eyes into the dark bowels of cattle and sheep, dying thus with the dead. They snapped ferociously at the legs of horses, they leaped at throats. Some stampeded the dwindling herds and flocks; the beasts fled blindly toward the haze of the horizon, the dogs leaped and snapped at their heels. The dogs turned and slashed one another madly, racing from sight.

Soldiers fell from their horses, stricken by heat and exhaustion—they were trampled underfoot. Some became crazed, suddenly dashing among their fellows with whirling swords; they were killed with difficulty. . . . Like the beasts and the people, the soldiers, too, dashed in mad swarms toward the metal edge of the sky.

Now the Kirghiz and Bashkirs became part of such hysterical flight. They swarmed among the people and troops, pursued by the same fear, under the same maddening sun and moon, killing and killed. The savage warriors clung to their foes with the bitter strength of dying men.

Dust rose from the desert in great clouds. Men and animals choked and panted in the crimson gloom. The mad dogs slashed and tore over the sand without baying or barking; the stampeding beasts could make no sound. Torgut and Kirghiz soldiers fought savagely, riding and slashing with swords as they rode—yet they uttered no cries.

There was no sound but the creaking of dry wheels, the clatter and thud of weapons, the hoarse breathing of man and beast, the muffled trampling of hooves in the sand. Yet the air seemed filled with a ferocious roaring noise, the unearthly winds of death.

The sand giants whirled more savagely, pursuing those who tried to escape, shrouding them in silence, scorching their flesh with lashes of burning sand. In a vast cloud of dust, the whole mass of men and animals plunged toward the eastern borders of the Kurminin Kum. And the dust and sand filling the air grew luminous, glowing, as though the air had caught fire from the sun, baleful as a giant red wick in the metal bowl of the sky.

Thus ended August 24, and the twenty-fifth day of the month began. . . .

Was it day or night? morning or noon or dusk?

None knew—none could see but a blinding fire; none could hear but a roar of death; none could feel but an eternal flight of nightmare—none could tell.

Yet the air had cleared. The sky was blue; the sun was red no more. A soft wind, smelling of grass, was blowing from the east.

None believed their eyes, their sense of smell, their ears.

An injured bird lay on the sand.

Old Khoochin, riding with Subutai and some troops a few miles ahead of the horde, stared at the bird with his burnt weak eyes. His great hooded berkut was dead; Khoochin's flesh was dry and shrivelled as a dead man's. A strange look came over his yellow face. Slowly he tapped his leg—his joints ached in the moist wind. His lips shrank back from their toothless gums, he stumbled down from his horse and over the sand.

The bird peered at Khoochin with bright eyes, the bird hopped away over the sand. The old man lunged after the bird, he caught the bird in a frantic grasp of his shrivelled hands.

Khoochin struggled to his feet, his eyes already glazed with death, like those of the crushed bird. But on his face was a look of belief, of new hope. He held the bird high aloft, like a symbol of life and water, and then he fell dead.

The troops stared—they rubbed their eyes and looked at one another, like men waking from some long and hopeless nightmare. And behind them, too, the people of the horde raised their eyes again to the sky.

In the east, far off, down through a long and rocky pass, a pale blur of blue and green met their eyes.

The people shook themselves, unable to believe their eyes. Was it a mirage, another false picture on the eastern horizon? The people murmured, the animals paused and lifted their heads.

Quiet and strangeness held the horde a moment.

Overhead the sun shone brightly in a blue sky, and in the east white clouds were seen. Under the clouds and sunlight lay the green reeds and the grass, the blue waters of the great sea into which flowed the Ili, the Lake Balkasch.

Then with a thunderous shout the Torguts surged eastward.

A wide and rocky valley sloped down between two ranges of the Jarminin Hills to the shore of the lake. In a few moments the valley was choked with animals and carts and people.

Many of the advance guard of soldiers broke from their company formations and galloped down the valley toward the water. Temuru, Momotubash, and the other officers shouted hoarsely, trying to command an orderly descent to the sea. But animals came in great bellowing, plunging droves; and the carts came creaking and lurching from all directions, choking the head of the valley. The people, on horseback or perched on the rumbling carts, shouted and raced hysterically toward the blue lake below. The

whole valley was soon packed with a clamouring, shoving mass of carts and animals. The soldiers in advance broke ranks and galloped for their lives ahead of the thundering avalanche.

The bony and wild-eyed cattle bellowed and collided, the frantic sheep in bleating masses surged down to the sea. Carts were dashed against great rocks, animals burst in stampeding waves over the wrecks. People who leaped from their carts and fled down toward the water on foot were crushed and trampled. Others abandoned their broken wagons by leaping to the backs of beasts, shouting wildly, clinging to gaunt cattle or lumbering oxen whose red eyes were fixed on the blue water seen distantly over the plunging animals and lurching carts below. Horses snorted and shrieked, caught in the dense packs of slower beasts. And on the rocky sides of the valley, along the ridges of the hills, the dogs ran snarling and baying toward the east.

The Torgut horde poured down through the valley of the Jarminin Hills in a savage torrent.

Far to the rear, Prince Bambar and his soldiers tried to keep the frantic hoshuns and aimaks from converging in dense masses toward the valley already choked with beasts and carts. But the animals, refusing to be herded, raced in bellowing packs toward the gap between the low hills. People were just as crazed ; they shouted in frenzy, cracking their long whips, riding and driving their carts pell-mell into the jammed aimaks and hoshuns ahead, looking with glittering eyes down from the edge of the desert over the swarming valley to the distant water, where, like an infinite number of small black dots, people and animals were already scattering among the trampled green reeds and plunging into the salty lake, spreading fanwise into the blue sea like a dark and mighty delta of living silt.

And then from the rear, suddenly, the Kirghiz and Bashkirs came riding in a mass attack, trying to break their way through the Torgut guard. Some of them burst Bambar's

lines and dashed among the panic-stricken people and beasts, slaughtering ferociously before they were felled by pursuing troops. The Torgut companies came closer, yielding ground desperately. They fought staunchly but, outnumbered as they were, they were slowly forced back to within a few hundred yards of the densely massed people and animals near the head of the valley.

The frantic people, waiting their turn to enter the valley, saw no other direction to flee. Beyond their own soldiers, spread out in a great arc five miles long, they saw the flashing swords and the dark fanatic faces of their foes in a slowly tightening ring. A terrific bedlam of shouts and cries went up—even the animals bellowed and bleated with fear. All tried to crowd and jam their way down into the valley.

Bambar tried to rally his men. Sword in hand, he galloped along behind the Torgut lines, shouting fiercely. But the men, grunting and sweating, were still yielding ground.

Near the centre of the battle-arc a Kirghiz wedge was being driven through the defending troops ; among the Kirghiz was a dark and savage chieftain, clad in silver chain-mail, whirling a great double-edged sword.

Bambar—thinking that if he could kill the Kirghiz leader, then his own soldiers might take heart—suddenly dashed toward Beran. The Torgut soldiers, shouting as wildly as their foes, closed their ranks and thus isolated the Kirghiz wedge behind their lines. Bambar raised his sword, galloping toward the savage prince. Beran shouted hoarsely ; one of his men threw a lance at the old Torgut warrior, piercing his groin. Some of Bambar's men closed in on the Kirghiz band, fighting desperately. Blood was pouring from Bambar's wound and his vision seemed misty ; but still he advanced, slashing toward Beran. The Kirghiz chieftain whirled his great sword. Beran's men, encircled by the Torguts, themselves encircled the Torgut and Kirghiz chiefs. Bambar could dimly see the savage

lips drawn back in a snarling smile from his enemy's white teeth. He tried to raise his word, but it fell from his weakened grasp. And then Beran, seizing the old man's head by the hair, severed it from his body and held it high aloft—its moustached lips still twitching—for all to see. A deep groan went up from the Torgut soldiers, seeing Bambar's bloody head in Beran's hand. And from beyond the Torgut line came a savage, triumphant shout. The Kirghiz, in a yelling mob, burst through the Torgut troops at a dozen points.

The helpless people—the women, the children, the old people perched on the carts among the massed animals that shoved and eddied near the head of the valley—shrieked and tried to push forward, to escape.

But there was no place to flee. The Torgut soldiers, fighting in desperate groups, were overwhelmed. All seemed lost.

Then from the north came new Torgut battle-shouts—faint at first, but swiftly swelling, with a thundering of hooves before which Kirghiz riders were already fleeing in droves. . . . Galloping from the northern hill came Subutai and two thousand men; they had flanked the horde and the valley, circling down on the Kirghiz from the north. Hysterical shouts rose from the hoshuns still massed near the head of the Jarminin Valley, when the people saw Subutai and his Torgut horsemen sweeping the Kirghiz riders before them like a mighty wind.

Now it was the Torguts who pursued their enemies, driving them south. Beran whirled his great sword, galloping among the Kirghiz and Bashkir troops, leading them to the south-east, beyond the Jarminin Hills.

Bambar's troops quickly reformed their ranks. Some remained to defend the valley, and some of them joined Subutai and his men, pursuing the Kirghiz south and then eastward along the southern slope of the hills.

Far ahead, among the galloping Kirghiz, Subutai could

see the glint of sunlight on the distant chain-mail of Beran. Beyond the Kirghiz, beyond the eastern end of the hills, were the green plains near the River Ili, where the river flowed its last mile or two into the Balkasch. Now and then—over a rocky ridge, or around a curving shoulder of the hills—Subutai could get a distant glimpse of these green plains, already covered with small black dots, a host of people and beasts spreading far and wide from the throng crowding down through the valley. Toward the distant river, which Subutai could see like a silver path through the green fields, Beran and the Kirghiz were galloping with savage cries faintly heard.

And Subutai and the Torgut soldiers, hoping to overtake their enemies before they reached the water and the multitudes of people and beasts quenching their thirst in river and lake, plunged down the long and rocky slope south of the Jarminin Hills, shaking their lances and swords fiercely whenever they caught sight, far below, of the Kirghiz troops, shouting wild and frantic battle-cries. . . .

The Torguts continued to pour down through the valley.

Those who reached the shore of the sea were crowded into the water. Carts were mired among the tall green reeds. Animals plunged into the blue salty water of Lake Balkasch, drinking greedily. Soldiers shouted commands, trying to herd the animals toward the mouth of the Ili, where the water was sweet. Neither beasts nor people paid any heed. Behind them, from the broad winding valley of the Jarminin, thousands upon thousands of animals came shoving and bellowing toward the sea. People driving carts tried to turn eastward along the shore; often they were swept, amidst a dense mass of animals, out into the lake. Sand and silt were churned up by the hooves of beasts and the cart wheels. People and animals tried to slake their thirst in the polluted and salty water. Drivers sought to escape the stampeding herds, whipping

their oxen fiercely along sand-bars that paralleled the shore. Wheels caught in the sand, the carts sank deeper in the water. Sheep and cattle lifted their wet faces from the water, they turned their blood-shot eyes to the sun and swam frantically far from shore, pursued by thousands pouring down from the valley above. Carts were carried into the deep water, where their loads became water-logged; the carts sank, dragging the oxen under the waves. Far out in the blue lake many people and animals drowned, sinking under white bubbles that burst like gold in the sun.

Some of the carts and animals, dashing madly through the green reeds and along the occasional stretches of white sandy shore, managed to escape the living avalanche that came rolling down from the Jarminin Hills. They raced toward the mouth of the Ili River, they plunged down its low bank, they thronged its broad bed and its silver shallows. Far away the avalanche roared down the valley, dense clouds of dust rose from the great cleft in the hills and from the crowded shore. Here the water was sweet and cool, and the people and animals slowed their flight, drinking deeply.

But now the cattle and sheep who had been swimming beyond the sand-bars came stumbling from the sea up the shallow mouth of the Ili. Carts which had managed to pass safely through the shallow water, too, came thronging. Vast clouds of sea-birds, of wild-fowl who had risen from the reeds, flew screeching overhead. They rose from quiet pools along the river, darkening the dusty air, where the animals and carts came shoving and crowding along the course of the Ili. The birds wheeled and screeched, shadowing the sun with their flapping wings, circling over the valley and the steaming lake and the trampled shore. Up the river, seeking cool sweet water, the dense vanguard of Torguts and animals made their way.

Into the midst, suddenly, came the Kirghiz.

The savages came down from the south, having passed around the Jarminin Hills with Subutai and his soldiers still in pursuit.

People raised their faces from the water, staring incredulously at the dark mad faces of their enemies. Mouths remained open, eyes became glazed, as their blood was emptied by lance or sword into the sweet water flowing down to the sea.

Many people, seeing the Kirghiz galloping along the river bank or splashing toward them through the water, seeing no way of escape, lowered their faces again and drank frantically—as though determined to slake their thirst, at least, before they died. And yet many, looking up again, saw their foes near-by, their faces plunged greedily into the water. Torguts and Kirghiz alike drank the silver water streaked with blood. Some of the people, seeing the Kirghiz soldiers thus slaking their thirst, beat the savages with clubs and whips, snatched their weapons, skewered them with lances and knives.

Then came Beran, whirling his great sword and shouting fanatically, slashing at his own men who lingered too long in the stream. Once more the Kirghiz gripped their weapons and moved northward toward the lake, slaughtering people and animals as they went. Beran and his savage hosts seemed bent on destroying as many lives as they could, before their own were lost.

Animals trampled the dead underfoot, miring their bodies in the sand of the river bed. The water, which thousands upon thousands were gulping in great draughts, turned slowly from silver to crimson and brown. Steam and dust rose in thick billows to the sky, and overhead the birds screamed, the sun burned red in the bitter air.

Now the people and the beasts in the river bed attempted to turn, to flee downstream toward the lake, bellowing and shouting for the soldiers. But Temuru and Momotubash, who had tried to rally their men first at the valley-head

and then on the shore, were far away. The soldiers of the vanguard companies—all but Subutai's, who had originally been riding the northern ridge of the Jarminin, out of the way of the stampeding horde—all the Torgut warriors were scattered in small bands among the crowding, bellowing masses on the trampled shore and in the churning, steaming lake. The people and animals, stampeding now in retreat, collided in a vast and hopeless tangle with the mighty streams of newcomers who were thronging from the lake and the shore and the valley above.

Subutai and his men, not pausing to drink, came thundering down the bank of the Ili. The Kirghiz, fearing to be caught in the snarl of bodies and carts at the mouth of the river, spurred their horses away from the river and began hacking a path over the shore toward the valley, from which the Torgut hoshuns were still pouring in thick streams. Subutai and the Torgut troops pressed down on Beran and his men from the north.

The Kirghiz split into many bands. Some of them were forced out into the lake. Temuru, Momotubash, squads and companies of Torgut soldiers, all pursued the mad savages among the shallows and deeps of the sea.

People still coming through the valley now looked down on a scene of terror. They saw metal flashing among the waves, they saw the water grow crimson as sunset in wide pools on the sea. They paused in the valley, they tried to retreat. But all who hesitated in the pass were over-run. The animals massed behind them still came shoving and bellowing down to the water, in a mad and irresistible avalanche. The people in the valley were trapped. Some tried to scale the walls of the Jarminin Hills, deserting their carts and scrambling up the rocks. But the stampeding masses of animals, filling the valley and hillsides, forced the disordered hoshuns and aimaks to pour steadily down to the shore of the sea.

Over the whole vast scene—the crowded valley between

the hills, the curving shore of the lake—birds wheeled and screamed ; and in the dusty, steamy air burned the red sun. A thunderous roar came from the valley, from the shore and the sea—cries of pain and rage, savage battle-shouts, the clashing of steel, the pounding of hooves, the bellowing and bleating of animals, the shrieks of wounded horses.

Yet far beyond the southern shore of Balkasch, beyond the sand-bars and deep pools of the lake between the Jarminin valley and the Ili River, far away, to the northern and eastern horizons and even beyond, stretched the serene blue water of the sea, in distant sunlight and silence.

Only on the southern shore, on the long curving beach where people and animals were densely massed, crazed by water and blood, only here, in all the infinite scene, was the air dark and lurid, with roaring clouds of steam and dust, through which the birds flew darkly and the red sun burned.

The battle of Balkasch was fought with no mass strategy. There was neither time nor space to rally or deploy warriors in formal encounter. Among the carts, the welter of frightened animals, on the beach, among the reeds, in river and sea, many battles were fought. Several times—now far, now near—Subutai caught a brief glimpse of Beran, his chain-mail wet and shining with water and blood, whirling his great sword among people and beasts. The Torgut soldiers, like the Kirghiz, split into many bands. Temuru, Momotubash, Chereng, Zebek, Ubasha—all these, and all their soldiers, fought savagely wherever they could against their fanatic foes. Many battles were fought on the Balkasch shore, all fierce and merciless. But no battle was fought so fierce, so merciless, as that between Subutai and the Kirghiz Beran. . . .

For at last Subutai and Beran were near, separated by only a few of their men.

The savage, arrogant chieftain was covered with blood. His lips were stretched tightly away from his white teeth. His eyes glittered like fire in his dark face, the sword whirled in his burnt hand.

Subutai and a few Torguts pressed forward, shouting and clashing with the Kirghiz.

Beran severed Tuluku's head with one stroke of his blade.

Subutai cried hoarsely, cutting his way with a dagger and sword toward the Kirghiz prince.

Then far over the white beach fought Subutai and Beran, among the carts and animals, among the green reeds, over the white sand trampled and stained with blood.

Once Beran seemed to flee. But then he suddenly turned and circled his sword in a great arc under the throat of Subutai's white Bar-Kul mare. The throat of the brave horse burst—blood gushed down her white chest, her eyes turned to Subutai and her legs gave way. With a choking cry, Subutai brought his own blade down on the arm of the Kirghiz chief.

Beran's sword flew through the air, still gripped by his severed hand. Twisting his bloody stump in pain, the savage prince spurred off again. Subutai pursued his enemy on foot, his eyes blazing murderously. Among a stampeding pack of sheep, Beran's horse stumbled and lurched. Subutai leaped forward and clutched at the chieftain's leg, twisting him from the saddle.

A Kirghiz lance came whirring toward Subutai; it pierced his leg—the point burst out from the inner part of his thigh. He fell, tripped by the shaft of the lance—he whacked frantically at the spear with his sword. He severed the wooden shaft, leaving the head of the lance in his leg—he lurched to his feet again.

Beran, crouching near-by, heaved a great rock at his head.

Subutai warded off the stone with his sword. The sword rang on the rock and spun through the air.

Now Beran leaped in, clutching a long Persian dagger in his left hand. He grappled Subutai with his bloody stump, aiming the long thin blade at the Torgut's heart. Subutai caught his own Turkish knife in his left hand—he seized Beran's wrist with his right. Sweat poured down their bodies, their glazed eyes stared blindly at one another. A horse dashed past, searing Subutai's back with a stroke of his hoof. For a moment his clutch weakened on Beran's wrist. And then Beran's sharp Persian blade ripped down through his muscles of shoulder and chest. The air roared and flashed. Beran's dagger fell from his hand. And Subutai's blade drove deeply, then, into the back of the Kirghiz prince. . . .

Thus Beran died, with a hoarse sigh ; and near him fell Subutai.

The battle raged in river and lake. The water turned red, the mouth of the river grew choked with bodies and limbs of the dead. People and animals drowned, gulping the water of crimson salt. Mist and steam rose from the water, dust rose from the beach. Shouts and expiring cries filled the air. The red sun burned low in the west. Vultures flew overhead.

Many died in battle, many Torgut warriors fell. Momotubash was killed, and Prince Bambar. Temuru lost an arm and an eye, the Prince Chereng a leg, Zebek was slashed in the groin. The waters of the lake, the river, the shore, all were thick with dying and dead. All of the Kirghiz and Bashkirs were killed, none of them fled.

The sun went down, the pale sky glowed with crimson and gold, and then grew dark.

In the quiet of night, in the cool of dusk by the Balkasch Sea, the dead lay in the dark water and the dying crawled to the shore. Up the Ili River, away from the silent beach

where the last fire of war had blazed, the remnants of the Torgut horde crept. Like weak and crippled insects they crept, out at last from under the metal bowl and the wick of death, they crept where the Ili flowed cool and sweet in the dark night, and there they fell sleeping in the green grass.

CHAPTER TEN



The water of the sea lapped quietly, gently in the night. A white moon rose slowly in the east. A melancholy air blew over the sea and the silent beach.

Among the bodies, stretched out like sleepers on the moonlit shore, came Cedar-chab. She paused at the river, she paused at the sea. Water washed softly over the bodies ; their dead faces were turned to the luminous moon. She felt a sadness, vast as the sea, a strange cool loneliness like that of the river, flowing endless and lost in the moonlit sea. She came among the bodies on the beach at last, peering at all who lay like sleepers in the night.

As she passed among them, like the sad breeze over the sea, she called faintly :

“ Subutai. . . ”

None answered, nothing moved but the sea—all seemed sleeping or dead.

From far away, from the depths of a great black corridor it seemed, Subutai saw her moving among the dead. The sweet and lonely figure was small and distant as a dream, like a vision of some far, white peak seen through the black clouds of despair, and her voice came from far away too, faint like the sweet melancholy whisper of memory.

He raised his head, he tried to speak.

He had crawled over the bodies, the sand, hauling his wounded body away from the sea. When he woke, earlier, all was black about him, all was dead. The pain had ceased in his chest and leg, he was cold and numb. The moon rose,

white and distant in the sky ; the sea washed near-by on the silent shore. He hauled himself over the dead, crawling up the beach to a patch of grass.

Now he called faintly, seeing her near.

He thought she was going to pass, like the figure in a dream.

But she paused, turning her face in the quiet moonlight ; she ran and fell to her knees at his side.

" Ah God, Subutai, it's you ! " she cried over and over again, smiling and crying, " It's you, Subutai, ah God ! "

And Subutai, smiling faintly for the first time in months, looking deep into her eyes, with her lips murmuring near his, sighed and fell into a peaceful sleep.

When he woke again, the moon was already in the west. At first he thought she had gone. But she was sitting near-by, watching him quietly. While he was sleeping, she had discovered his wounds. In anguish, she had torn his filthy clothes apart. His chest was covered with clots of blood. She went for water, she bathed his face and chest. When she found the spear-head lodged in his leg, her face blanched. Somehow she managed to draw it free. Fresh blood poured from the wound ; Subutai stirred in his sleep. Sobbing, she ripped the red silk gown from her body and bound his wounds. She could do no more—she sat watching him sleep. . . . When he woke and looked around, she seized his hand gently.

" Here I am," she whispered.

" I feared it was only a dream."

" You're terribly wounded, Subutai," she said quietly.

" Yet I have done what I could."

" Now I shall never die ! " he said, trying to smile.

" If you die, Subutai—then do I die, too."

" You're shivering, Cedar-chab—you're chill——"

" It's my heart, trying to burst free," she whispered, carrying his hand to her breast. Through the thin silk of her under-gown he could feel the flesh of her breast quiver

with the beat of her heart. She said, "It's your heart, Subutai—yours to let free——"

They looked at one another, then. . . . In the moonlight it seemed that each was fair again, that the gaunt and hollow cheeks were full, the eyes bright and eager as they had been, long ago, in the Volga woods. But Subutai looked away, at last.

"Go now, Cedar-chab," he said desperately, withdrawing his hand.

"And let you die?"

"Else you die too!"

"O Subutai," she said, "rather would I die with you than return."

"Then we must both go."

"No," she cried, "let us die here, if need be—then let death join us——"

"Death is cold, Cedar-chab—I have been near——"

He tried to rise. He groaned and fell.

She wrapped her warm arms around his body.

"Subutai."

He turned his face to the moon.

"We made an oath, Subutai."

"I returned you yours."

"Nothing returns, Subutai."

"I know."

"It was wrong—the oath still binds my heart——"

"Ah God, Cedar-chab!" he whispered. "And mine. . . ."

Below, beyond the beach, the moonlit sea washed on the melancholy shore. The dead lay like sleepers in the cold white light. A breeze blew over them with a sad and lonely air.

She cradled his head, crooning softly, a whispered lullaby for the dying and dead. His face lay against her breast, her heart, shielded from the light. He struggled no more, he seemed to have found peace at last. His body felt cold

and stiff in her arms, she thought he was dead. Her bones and heart seemed chill, but her flesh was still warm and her heart beat bitterly against his quiet head.

"Let death enter me too!" she cried—"come with a chill and silent stroke. . . ."

But she saw the moon decline in the west, she heard the wash of the sea, her heart still beat. Her voice, sweet and melancholy as the lonely wind, crooned a threnody for those who slept on the shore. . . . And then, far down the beach in the waning light, something moved. Her eyes widened in wonder. One of the dead had ceased to sleep, the dying were struggling back to life. Here and there a few others now moved, slow and pitiful as the sea, crawling toward the sound of her lonely voice. Their faces rose in the same blind wonder as her own, that death could end its hold. Slowly, wonderingly, up the long and difficult slope of the shore, among the still slumbering dead, a few came with pain but a reawakened light in their eyes.

A morning star was clear and bright in the east for a time. From out far over the cold water of the sea, great flocks of wild-fowl and gulls began to rise, circling and soaring toward the higher air where dawn tipped their wings.

On the shore, where it was still dark, Cedar-chab cradled Subutai's head fiercely to her breast.

"I don't want to die!" she cried, "I want him to live. . . ."

The bones deep in her flesh grew warm again, her heart beat frantically against his face.

"O Buddha," she cried, "O Goddess Marici! O Khan Tengri our Torgut god, help us now—let us live again. . . ."

But Subutai lay rigid and cold in her arms. His face was scarred by war, burned by the desert sun, lined with worry and care. Was he sleeping, was he dead?

Up the steep shore, in the light of dawn, the sleepers climbed more consciously.

Cedar-chab thought of the long way they had come; the

snow and marshes and deserts ; the vacillation and treachery of their leaders ; the mad enemies who had fired the plains and deserts with war, and had destroyed themselves together with Torgut hosts—she thought of the long silence of all their gods. With none to save them in the dark and burning world, with none to guide them among the mad herdsmen of death, only a light of their own had led the people. Was it quenched by the blazing fire of war and destruction—was it still lit ?

Brighter, like the growing dawn, the eyes of the few who crawled among the sleepers now opened and stared with wonder at her face lit by the morning sun.

“ O Torgut people,” she cried, “ wake again and rise, O Subutai ! ”

And in her arms then, wonderingly, Subutai opened his eyes and looked at her. His body relaxed, he moaned and stirred in a morning fever. And Cedar-chab, with a deep convulsive sob, buried her face against his.

Thus Subutai lived again, on the shore of the Balkasch Sea, near where the Ili flowed, in the clear morning, which was no return, but a new, and still unknown, dawn.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



For several nights and days the Torguts remained near Lake Balkasch, scattered for many miles along the Ili River. People and animals slept wherever they fell, too exhausted to move. Many were wounded, and many suffered frightfully or died from the salty lake-water they had heedlessly gulped. Through the night, much of the next day, and the following night all slept.

On the second morning they woke. At dawn the lamas, who had been silent in the desert, now beat their brass gongs and sounded their horns and mantras to the rising sun. The people blinked disinterestedly. None saw the blue sky, the silver shoals of the river and the green fields near-by—none seemed to realize that they had been delivered from death. The lamas went among the people, praising God. Yet few of the people looked at the priests. They felt they had delivered themselves from the desert and the Moslem savages.

The princes issued orders that the animals should be left in the great communal herds and flocks the stampeding beasts had formed. Yet few obeyed. They felt that the princes had led them into disaster, and that whatever was left of their own flocks and herds should be segregated and saved for themselves. People, worried and anxious, went among the animals seeking their own.

Of the great animal wealth which the Torguts had possessed in January, when the migration began, less than a tenth remained. In many cases, people found no cattle

or sheep of their own. Many, too, were without meat ; their carts were gone. Some of the carts were sunk deep in the sea, some were mired among reeds or wrecked in the Jarminin Valley. A few people went searching forlornly among the dead on the Balkasch shore, or in the silent and trampled pass, seeking their carts and goods.

Yet great numbers of the people found neither animals nor household goods nor food. They went into the near-by deserts, muttering, and gathering derisun ears for gruel.

A change had come over the people. They compared their torn and filthy clothes with the fresh gowns and kalats of the rich ; they ate their bitter gruel and thought of the meat which the lamas and princes enjoyed. . . . The escape from the desert, the whole migration thus far, seemed to have brought them only a bitter poverty.

Yet it was the people, with a deep will to live again, who restored some measure of order through the scattered and broken horde of Torgut camps. They searched out their own hoshuns and aimaks. They elected new demschis and shulengas and saissangs, to replace those who had died or been killed. In many cases they elected younger men, soldiers, men who spoke bitterly as themselves about the princes and priests. The people restored order among themselves.

But it was a different people than before—an impoverished people, bitter about the past, distrustful of their leaders, uncertain about the future—who reorganized the hoshuns and aimaks of the Torgut horde along a thirty-mile stretch of the Ili River near Lake Balkasch.

Here on the third day they waited, while the remaining flocks and herds grazed in the narrow fields along the stream. Weary and anxious, the people waited for someone—the khan, the princes, the priests, the generals—to decide what they should do next, where they should go. They distrusted their leaders. But what could they do ?

They could only hope that someone might still appear to show them the way to freedom and peace. . . .

And here, late in the afternoon of the third day, to a special meeting of the Sarga, came members who still remained of the Torgut Council.

The golden sunlight tinted the thick green forest on the northern shore of the Ili River, it lay mellowly on the green banks where sheep and cattle grazed ; it streaked down through a small grove of linden trees, where the khan's blue pavilion stood open to a pleasant breeze.

Slaves brought steaming platters of meat and pots of fragrant tea to the princes, who were clad in fresh robes, seated on cushions of red and yellow silk.

Temuru looked around with a dull and haunted eye.

Where was Momotubash, old companion and warrior—dead on the Balkasch shore ? And the noble Choktu, wise man and warrior—dead by whose hand in the Kurminin Kum ? And Bambar, the sombre and trustworthy prince, uncle of Ubasha and father of Loosang ?

The old warrior sighed heavily. The socket of his lost eye burned ; and his shoulder twitched with pain, where the arm had been cut away and cauterized with hot irons. . . . He looked at those who remained.

They too, despite their fine clothes, had been stricken. The Khoshote prince, Erranpal the father of Mandere, had a great gash on his forehead. Chereng groaned when he moved the stump of his leg—Zebek sat with sweat on his brow, and with his hands clutching his groin. Even Ubasha, still haggard and nervous, had the look of a sick and dispirited man.

Only the Lama Loosang, seated with a holy pilgrim from Tibet, seemed healthy and unharmed.

Temuru frowned and blew on his tea.

The princes had been eating and sipping tea, talking in a preoccupied manner as they ate. Now Ubasha raised a trembling hand, he called for silence.

"Zebek wishes to bring a charge," he said.

"Yes—against Cedar-chab," Zebek said harshly. "Against her and Subutai, I seek the law."

Loosang and the holy man murmured together in Tibetan.

"Our visitor is a famous pilgrim, a monk, a true Koubilgan," Loosang said softly, "and he wonders why such a question takes precedence now, when all thought should be upon God."

"I suppose holy men can choose when to think of God," Zebek said, looking sharply at the lama—"just like they can think of certain passes that don't exist—"

"Perhaps we can hear from Temuru," said Ubasha, with a grateful look toward Loosang, who lowered his eyes.

The old warrior flushed and cleared his throat.

"Why, only this," he said bluntly. "I went to the Balkasch shore, the morning after the battle, to seek the body of my son Subutai. There I found him with Cedar-chab. She had tended his wounds and was bringing him back from the dead. His body lay over a horse she had caught, she was leading him toward the river. When I spoke to her, she smiled and brought the braids of her hair around under her chin, like a married woman. This is all I know, except what she said. We came to the khan."

"She was betrothed to me, as all know!" Zebek said angrily. "They have broken the law."

The lama spoke quietly :

"What does the girl say?"

"That they are man and wife," Zebek said, flushing.

"Perhaps," said Loosang, "she says this, merely so that your betrothal be broken."

"Bring her here—why not?" said Chereng.

"Bring my sister!" Ubasha said to a slave.

"Yes—it's probably all a mistake, isn't it so?" said Erranpal.

Zebek scowled, sweat dripped from his brow. He peered covertly at Loosang and the Koubilgan.

Ever since the ill-fated expedition to the Chu, on which he had staked everything and lost, Zebek had nursed a bitter hatred for the lama. He had forgotten his own treachery, even the savage treachery of Beran. The map which the lama had given him seemed the most monstrous treachery of all. And ever since Lev's death, he had suspected that Loosang, even more than Lev, had somehow been instrumental in foiling his plot against the khan's life. It was really, he thought angrily, as though Loosang had played Zebek and Ubasha against one another from the very start—with the object of letting them destroy one another, and thereby gaining the ultimate power over the Torgut horde himself.

The lama could complete the destruction of Zebek at a stroke now, if he wished, by divulging the full extent of Zebek's treachery. Subutai, the one soldier who perhaps understood Zebek's plots at first hand, might also expose these things. For this very reason, it seemed to Zebek like a miracle that Subutai had stumbled into a trap himself. . . . But now Loosang, who ought to have taken a stern and religious stand against the transgressors, seemed curiously disinterested.

Zebek sweated more profusely than ever, peering sideways at the lama. Perhaps Loosang had some dark and secret reason for indicating that no action should be brought against Subutai at the time.

"Ah god!" Zebek thought suddenly. "Perhaps he plans to use Subutai's testimony to his own purpose—to hold it like a club over my head!"

He peered more sharply than ever at Loosang and the Koubilgan. He wondered, with new suspicion, where the Koubilgan really had come from, what Loosang discussed with the pilgrim in Tibetan tongue—whether the man was really a monk, a Koubilgan?

But the Lama Loosang sat with a serene and pious face bent downward, staring at his folded hands through which a rosary slowly moved. And the Koubilgan, like a true man of God, sat in his humble clothes, ethereal and contemplative, his body immobile, his face impassive.

Zebek's groin ached sharply, sweat dripped heavily from his brow.

Cedar-chab entered the pavilion at last. All of them, having awaited her with silent preoccupation, now raised their eyes. Even the holy man, the Koubilgan, looked at her for a moment with suddenly light and penetrating eyes. Then his expression became blank again—he sank his thoughts in meditation. The other men shifted their limbs, they blinked uncomfortably and cleared their throats. . . . For Cedar-chab stood among them erect and quiet in the gown of a slave.

Her face was serene and thoughtful. A curious glow of wonder and faith was in her eyes. The coarse gown that she wore seemed somehow finer than all the silken robes of the princes.

Loosang's eyes gleamed a moment; then he masked them.

"Daughter," he said softly, "one such as you should come here and kneel."

"I kneel to no man," she said quietly. "For in the clothes of a slave, I no longer have fear, nor hypocrisy."

Loosang muttered something abruptly to the pilgrim. The Koubilgan answered as slowly and quietly as Cedar-chab had spoken. Of all the assemblage, only the holy man and the girl, clad in poor coarse clothes, seemed at ease. The Lama Loosang, looking sharply at Cedar-chab again, translated :

"The Koubilgan also wears the clothes of the poor, by choice. Yet he kneels to God and his earthly princes not through hypocrisy, or fear, but through faith and love."

"My faith is in mankind," she answered, with a strange

and distant gaze. "I have seen the dead live again, neither by priest nor prince—by their own deathless spirit. Only to the people, sleeping in sorrow, do I kneel."

The lama muttered to the Koubilgan. Ubasha wiped a nervous hand over his face.

"Tell us the truth now, Cedar-chab," he said desperately, "I make final command."

Her eyes were clear and serene.

"I spoke the truth before," she said, "and again—I am the wife of Subutai, a woman of the people."

Ubasha looked all round with pleading eyes.

"This she has said for three days," he said, "still I know my sister well, it can't be the truth. . . ."

Temuru sighed heavily, he twisted his strong old hands.

"Yet she has never lied before," he said, "now she must speak the truth."

Loosang looked at her darkly.

"Perhaps she is mad," he murmured, "appearing in the garments of a slave and speaking thus. Perhaps the poor creature's mind was touched by the desert sun, by death."

The Koubilgan, who had been listening absently to Loosang's translation of all that Cedar-chab said, now spoke again.

"The Koubilgan thinks," Loosang said, "perhaps she speaks metaphorically, in the spirit. Just as God is heard by the holy men, so a voice of evil is often heard by the people. . . . In the possessed spirit of the people, perhaps, she speaks thus."

Cedar-chab stood quietly waiting.

"In the name of God, then!" Ubasha cried, "Speak the real truth, Cedar-chab—by the Holy Bichik!"

She gazed with strange wonder at something distant again.

"Truth is not in the stars," she said, "nor is it written by priests and princes. Truth is only written by the hearts and minds of the people."

"Let her go," muttered Zebek, who had avoided looking at her since the moment she appeared. "She may be crazy, but she's spoken the truth about Subutai."

Ubasha lowered his face, he waved Cedar-chab away.

The Koubilgan, when the girl had gone, spoke again.

"What manner of man is this Subutai?"

"A fine man, a brave fighter," mumbled the khan, "a true Torgut hero."

Loosang translated.

"Perhaps he is bewitched, too," said the Koubilgan. "Perhaps he has bewitched the girl."

"Yes—I'll tell you what he is!" Zebek burst out hotly, "An upstart, a friend of Cossack and Jew! a Shamanist infidel, a hothead——"

Loosang leaned toward the prince.

"Speak more gently, Zebek!" he murmured in the prince's ear—"lest the man Subutai speak in his sleep——"

"Perhaps we should see him, in order to judge," said the Koubilgan. "He should be brought here too, and let speak."

"He's in one of my carts, like a prisoner, delirious with wounds," Ubasha said in a low voice. "Since he came back he's been thus in a fever, unable to speak."

"Yes, and who knows?" Zebek said darkly. "The shaman, the wizard Bagha, lets nobody near the cart——"

"Nevertheless," said Loosang, looking at Zebek languidly, "we must wait for Subutai to speak. It is well Bagha guards him—although a true priest of the Living Buddha would be better."

The Koubilgan spoke again, thoughtfully.

"From all these things," he said humbly, "it appears the voice of God has been lost. . . . The voice of God must be heard again."

Loosang translated.

"Yes, it's a fact!" Chereng said suddenly. "The people are changed, they don't show the proper respect."

In my own ulus, they've elected some young hotheads for shulengas—they think they should talk and not listen. This is all part of the same thing, like Cedar-chab. They're different somehow. Is it so, or not so?"

"It's so," Ubasha said in a low voice, staring at his thin hands. "Yet mostly it's our own fault——"

"Something must be done," murmured Erranpal. "Perhaps it's all a matter of thinking of something."

Temuru, who had been twisting his hands and trying to grope for truth among all the things that were said, now leaped to his feet with a sudden thought.

"Think you," he said, "a man like Subutai, wounded and dying—could such a thing be?"

He looked all around, his eye suddenly bright.

"Perhaps not then," muttered Zebek—"but before, at the Chagan-Sara or elsewhere——"

"Ah," said Temuru, his eye dull again, sinking back. "Perhaps."

Loosang looked sharply at Ubasha.

"Then it's understood—we reserve judgment on Zebek's charge, for a time," he said. "And in the matter of disorder among the people, perhaps now they will listen to the voice of God, who saved them from death in the desert."

"The voice of the Living Buddha, the Dalai Lama in Tibet," murmured the Koubilgan, lowering his eyes piously to the east,—“who knows the true thought of God, and who thinks now and always of his Torgut children.”

"God's will," said Loosang, humbly. "He will bring order and peace to our people again. Are all agreed?"

The men murmured assent, and the council meeting was ended.

Thus at night temple fires were lighted throughout the horde. Images of Buddha were unveiled in all the aimaks, the lamas donned their ceremonial robes and intoned prayers of thanksgiving to God.

The people, who had been muttering among themselves

for several days, now crowded around the fires, curious to see and hear.

Many of them, after a moment, fell to their knees and sobbed convulsively—as though only now, really, understanding the terrible fate they had escaped—sobbing and giving thanks to Buddha and the Dalai Lama in the holy land of Tibet. . . .

In the poignance evoked by the incense and fires, the colourful robes of the priests and their orchestral chants, viewing the kind and thoughtful face of Buddha, after all these months of hardship and suffering, like something sweet and melancholy recaptured from old days, or that had been obscured somehow for a time, many of the people forgot their bitterness about the leaders who had betrayed or misled and failed them—they tried to forget their bitterness about the meat and robes of the rich, sinking to their knees and sobbing thankfully, peacefully in the arms of God at last.

The Koubilgan, the barefoot and poorly clad monk from Tibet, knelt among them humbly, smiling with holy bliss.

Bagha the Shaman stood to one side, muttering.

“That’s the way it goes,” he said. “Whose God is he, anyway? It was Otshir-bani, that’s who saved us—it was the Shamanist priest. . . . When did the lamas lift a voice? When did they raise a prayer, or rouse their Buddha to help the people? Khan Tengri, that’s who did it! the real god of the Torgut people. . . . And now look at them, the hypocritical lamas—you’d think they did it themselves!”

And disgustedly, he turned back to the cart in which Sand-chab had died, where now Subutai lay sleeping feverishly.

But there were others, besides Bagha, who felt as he did.

Norbo, the atheist, spoke boldly.

“What’s God got to do with it, anyway?” he said.

"It was our own good luck that we got here, nobody helped us. It was our own doing that we were saved at all."

Others spoke more mildly.

"There's something in what the priests say—Buddha was helping us, no matter what," they said. "But as far as those high-and-mighty fellows go, Loosang and all the rest—it's none of their doing, that's true."

"No, and I wouldn't trust them outside my yurt—they speak for nobody but themselves," Norbo said bitterly.

"Well, neighbour, but we've still a distance to go. We need God or someone to lead us, that's one thing sure."

"Lead yourselves," said Norbo.

"Listen, soldier," others complained, "it's all right for you fighting fellows to talk boldly and all that. But it's another thing entirely when a man has cattle and sheep to watch, or none at all. We've got to think about to-morrow—we've got to depend on God or someone for pasture and animals."

"Depend on yourselves!" muttered Norbo.

"What!" somebody cried, laughing harshly. "Maybe Norbo knows how to breed a cow or a sheep, instead of a child!"

All laughed, and Norbo snorted, riding off to join his troop.

In the morning, the lamas chanted their mantras with new vigour and the horde began moving again. More than nine-tenths of the animals, nearly half of the people, more than two-thirds of the troops had been killed or had died on the way, thus far. Yet the horde, moving east along the southern shore of the Ili River, skirting the deserts of Kurgan and Tau Kum, moved as a mighty throng. Soldiers rode in mass formation on the south, keeping watch over the desert for bands of Khara-Kirghiz from the Lake Issyl Kul beyond the deserts. The people, led by the lamas now, moved over the last miles of migration towards their ancient home, Djungaria, which lay north of Khan Tengri, highest

of all the mountains of Tian Shan, whose glittering white peak could already be seen in the eastern sky.

There was grass along the banks of the Ili, there was water. There were derisun shrubs in the desert near-by. . . . Thus the people travelled, for ten days, until they came to a shallow ford in the river just west of the mountainous lands of Djungaria.

On the ninth day, September 6, Subutai woke from his long and feverish sleep. Bagha had constantly tended his wounds, with poultices of herbs and with jealous care, keeping all visitors away from the cart. Subutai woke, in the dark of the night, calling in a firm clear voice for water.

Bagha leaned over him with a jug of water.

"Thank God, boy!" he said. "We practically gave you up for dead. . . . Now your wounds are healed, and you'll be fine, soon!"

For a long time Subutai lay staring up at the roof of the dark cart. And then he said:

"Cedar-chab?"

"She's near-by," Bagha whispered. "She's been to see you each day. . . . Perhaps she's coming now," he said, raising his head.

But it was Temuru, growling:

"Well—how is he to-night?"

Bagha struck a flint, lighting an oil lamp in the gloomy cart.

"He's awake," the shaman said, "and that's a good sign, at last——"

"How are you, boy?" Temuru said gruffly.

Subutai smiled weakly, sitting up. He looked at his father with a strange smile.

"I'll tell you what," the old warrior said uncomfortably, peering bluntly at his son. "What's the truth of all this business about you and Cedar-chab?"

Subutai looked blankly at Temuru and Bagha.

"He means," Bagha said—"have you and the girl been like man and wife?"

"Let the boy say!" Temuru growled. "Cedar-chab has said."

Subutai turned questioningly from the wizard to his father.

"She says it's the truth," the old warrior said harshly.

Subutai closed his eyes.

"Whatever she says is true," he said.

The Saissang Temuru stood moodily, silent and enigmatic, looking down at his son Subutai. Then he sighed deeply and rode away. He never looked back.

"That's not the truth!" Bagha whispered. "Why did you say so?"

Subutai said nothing. Bagha grunted and climbed down from the cart. He stood smoking in the dark. Suddenly he turned and whispered to Subutai:

"Pst! here she comes!"

Subutai could hear her voice clearly:

"Is he well, Bagha?"

"Awake," the shaman whispered. "And mind, now—only a moment!"

She climbed into the cart and knelt by Subutai. He looked up at her face and whispered:

"Why did you say such things?"

"Because it is so," she said—"or so I wish."

"And I."

"I thought much during the night," she said, "it seemed the only way to return."

"You brought me back."

She touched his hand quietly.

"Are you angry with me?" she whispered.

He stared at her, troubled and uncertain.

"You've changed," he said, "your clothes are poor——"

"Now I have nothing they can take from me," she said, "only life."

"Our lives!" he said bitterly. "What can come of them, now?"

"But we must live, Subutai—I saw it thus, on the shore of Balkasch—we must be free!"

"So I thought, once," he muttered.

"Yet again, Subutai—or the effort was no use!"

He looked at her with sudden wonder.

"Could it be?"

"Look you, Subutai—we can only be free, now, if our people be free," she said. "Partly I said these things of us, partly I wear such clothes, that the people may learn—that the people no longer fear princes and priests——"

"Ah, god, Cedar-chab—it's so!"

"Or otherwise would you live?"

"Yes, the path is still there!" he whispered. "The same path—I see it again——"

"Then let us climb it, O Subutai!"

"Otherwise I would die," he said. . . .

He was already sleeping, when Bagha peered into the cart a few moments after Cedar-chab had gone; he was breathing steadily with a quiet smile on his face.

Bagha blew out the lamp.

The next day, the seventh of September, several small bands of Khara-Kirghiz appeared in the south. Troops pursued them. There were sounds of distant fighting at dusk.

But by nightfall the Torgut horde had crossed the shallow ford in the River Ili, only a few miles from Chara Pen—near the broad pass of Altin Iml, the Golden Saddle, leading into the Tian Shan Mountains of Djungaria. Over the dark plain the mountains towered into the sky. The peak of Khan Tengri, covered with ice and snow, sparkled in the last light of the sun.

People raised their eyes, they stared, they could hardly believe it was true. The long and difficult migration, unequalled in all Torgut legend and history, was over at last.

Nothing remained but to enter their ancient land.

There was a moment of profound silence. All paused, even those far back, thirty miles or more away, crossing the river or still on the south side of the Ili. Could it be ! was it as simple as this—that suddenly, almost without warning, they had come to the end at last ! People looked at one another in wonder—they stared unbelievably at the dark and mighty mountains. They paused in absolute silence for a moment.

And then, suddenly, excited shouts burst from everyone. People laughed and sang and capered about. Even the old people smiled toothlessly and cried. Troops raced through the hoshuns—the soldiers shook their weapons and shouted with fierce joy. Great fires were built on the plain—nobody slept that night. . . .

Norbo came riding from the south. He looked for Subutai. Subutai was sitting on the edge of the cart, testing his leg. He had never seen Norbo looking so glum. He smiled at his friend and said :

“ Well, what now ? ”

Norbo's mouth twisted and he said :

“ Temuru.”

Subutai's jaw tightened.

“ It was a strange thing,” said Norbo, “ he didn't seem to care any more. . . . Khara-Kirghiz ! ” he spat suddenly. “ It should have been Turks, at the least ! ”

Subutai could say nothing. Norbo sat quietly near-by for a while. Then he said :

“ Subutai.”

His friend finally stirred.

“ You know what they're saying ? ” Norbo whispered. “ That Zebek has asked for your life ? ”

Subutai shrugged.

“ Listen ! ” Norbo whispered excitedly. “ They can't do it—I'll help you escape——”

Subutai turned, he smiled curiously at his friend.

"Escape?" he said slowly. "A man may escape from Cossacks and Kirghiz, Norbo—but he can never escape from his own people."

Norbo looked crestfallen again.

"Yes, that's so," he murmured.

"Nor escape from himself, said Subutai.

They sat together, silently, for a while.

"Then what?" Norbo said dully.

"The council is meeting to-night," said Subutai.

"What happens to me is unimportant—there are other things. . . . Chinese soldiers are at the border, at Chara Pen."

Norbo's mouth fell open.

"How do you know these things?" he stammered.

"I have ways."

"Then we're betrayed again!"

"Not yet," said Subutai, speaking rapidly. "Listen, Norbo, I've made many mistakes—I held my tongue and I spoke at the wrong times; I brought shame on my father for something I couldn't deny; I brought about his death, in a way. . . . But now I see clearly. To-night, in place of Temuru, I'm going to the council—I'm going to speak. I'm going to speak for Temuru, and all the ones who are gone——"

"And what will you say?"

"I shall know what to speak."

"And then?" Norbo said, excitedly.

"Then it's up to the people!" Subutai said. "Look you, Norbo. Go find the soldiers and men who knew Rabdan and Choktu—who followed Momotubash and my father——"

"Psst! What's that?" said Norbo.

Something was stirring near-by in the dark.

"Probably an animal," said Subutai. "Bring the people I spoke of," he continued, "bring them around the council tent, do you understand?"

"Ah!" cried Norbo, jumping on his horse. "I'm off . . . Hello! Who's that?"

He peered into the darkness again. A portly figure in the robes of a lama suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"Oh, it's only Kirik!" said Norbo, laughing. "Well, see you later, Subutai!"

The Lama Kirik, the khan's clerk, approached the cart.

"Subutai?" he said, striking a flint to his pipe.

"Hello, Kirik," Subutai said. "You're fatter than ever, I see."

The lama smiled good-naturedly.

"I'm glad you're well again," he said. "I've been to see you several times, but that damned witch-doctor wouldn't let anyone near."

He sat down companionably near Subutai, gripping his shoulder.

"I just heard about your father," he said softly. "He was a fine man."

"Yes," said Subutai.

The lama sighed, puffing his pipe. Suddenly he drew out his tobacco pouch and offered it to Subutai. They both smoked for a time, the glow of their pipe-bowls lighting their faces occasionally.

"Subutai," the lama said at last, "the true God is forgiving. But he is a God of peace, of law."

Subutai said nothing.

"Come to the feet of Buddha," the lama said softly—"come and deny your sins, Subutai—seek forgiveness and peace."

The kindly manner and voice of Kirik made Subutai blink, but he said:

"How can I deny my thoughts?"

"Deny only what the girl said."

"I can't," cried Subutai, "how can I deny such things?"

"For your sake and hers," Kirik said softly.

"To deny?" said Subutai, after a moment, speaking

slowly. "That would mean to admit the power of the priests, the princes—their right to say what a man does with his life——"

"Are these your thoughts, Subutai?" said the Lama Kirik.

"So," said Subutai.

"Yet no man does what he truly wills with his life," said Kirik—"these things are subject to other power than himself."

Subutai said nothing, and for a time they smoked again. Then Kirik leaned toward Subutai and said in a low voice :

"Listen, Subutai, I speak as your friend, not as a lama. Your life is at stake, perhaps. Loosang thinks certain things of you—it's all one to him, whether you live or die. . . . Zebek has already made peace with him and the Chinese envoy ; so had Chereng. Zebek wants you out of the way. Now perhaps Loosang does, too—he needs you no more. Ubasha is your only friend, the only one who still doesn't know. . . . Unless you accept Buddha, Subutai, unless you deny——"

"Accept Buddha?" cried Subutai. "Deny? That means to accept the Chinese khan—it means to deny our right to be free in our own land——"

"Perhaps there's no alternative!" Kirik said softly.

"We'll see!"

"Then you won't change your mind?"

"Never!" said Subutai.

With a ponderous sigh, the Lama Kirik tapped out his pipe and climbed down from the cart. He hesitated a moment, and then he moved away.

Subutai sat in the dark, thinking.

In the meantime, the pavilion had been raised on a slight rise in the ground for the council. Four great fires had been blazing since nightfall, ten feet from each corner of the tent, marking the solemnity of the occasion. These, together with the fires of celebration burning all through the horde, cast

a bright light over the plain. Between the council fires paced soldiers, armed with swords. Beyond them, on all sides, a great crowd of people had assembled.

Midnight came, and still the members of the council didn't appear. The people grew restless, craning their necks to see. New people came, many soldiers and people who had ridden far. Breathless with impatience, they tried to push their way forward. Others arrived, too—lamas and old people and people with holy beads. And then the princes began to arrive, at last.

Everybody rose on tiptoe, talking excitedly.

Zebek and Chereng were there—Erranpal, the Lama Loosang and Kirik and the Koubilgan from Tibet—and last of all came Ubasha. The people cheered half-heartedly for the princes, as they filed into the pavilion, led by Ubasha. But when the Lama Loosang entered the tent, holding a golden crozier of Buddha high in the air for all to see, a part of the crowd went wild with hysterical shouts. The members of the council, a little self-conscious with all the people watching from behind the fires, sat down on the cushions.

Suddenly a hoarse and mighty shout went up from the soldiers.

"It's Subutai!"

"What! I thought he was a prisoner! . . . What's he doing here?"

"He's saissang now—they've made him a council member, look and see!"

"But all the same," said others, "he ought to be punished, he broke the law!"

"Whose law?"

Arguments broke out on all sides.

"Sh!" cried someone loudly. "Let's hear what they say!"

The crowd suddenly became quiet.

Subutai entered the council pavilion, supporting himself by a stick. His soldier clothes looked incongruous in the

midst of all the silk and jewels of the princes. But he stood there a moment stalwartly, despite his wounds, gazing curiously at the Lama Kirik.

Kirik slipped behind Loosang quickly and sat down.

Loosang faced Subutai, holding his golden crozier in the air.

"Deny or not to Buddha," he said in a pontifical voice, "say whatever you may—there's no denying your thoughts."

"I deny nothing!" Subutai said, in a loud firm voice.

The Koubilgan bowed his head humbly, murmuring.

Loosang looked at each of the council members, in turn. . . . Erranpal nodded his head with an ostentatious sigh. Chereng bobbed his head briskly—Zebek looked down, to conceal his gleaming eyes. Only Ubasha sat without moving, staring at Subutai.

"Thus you have deserted Buddha," Loosang said to Subutai, then, "and his face is turned from you now."

Loosang turned his back on Subutai and sat down.

"Take him away!" Zebek cried to the guards.

One of the guards came toward Subutai. But the soldiers in the crowd surged forward angrily, shouting and pushing their way.

Ubasha brushed a trembling hand over his face and said: "Wait!"

The guard stepped back.

"Among our people," Subutai said, "are many gods—and all are respected. . . . But the law is what the people make, not priests."

The Koubilgan muttered rapidly to Loosang.

"He offends our holy visitor," the lama said loudly, but seeming to address Ubasha. "Such things are intolerable!"

People near-by in the crowd, people with rosaries, murmured angrily, hearing what the lama said. Some of them shouted obscene epithets at Subutai.

But the khan said:

"Among our people, a man has the right to speak."

Some of the near-by soldiers and people muttered approval of Ubasha's words.

"I speak of the princes, too," Subutai said in a loud clear voice. "The law we keep, they too must keep."

Ubasha leaned forward uncertainly.

"By what right," Zebek shouted, "does he speak here?"

"By right of Temuru my father," cried Subutai, "and all who are gone—all our men who have died for our people——"

Hoarse cheers went up from the crowd.

Ubasha frowned.

"What would you say, soldier?" he said.

"We have come a long way, O khan," said Subutai. "We have suffered and lost much. . . . What came we seeking, slavery?"

"No," murmured the khan.

"Freedom!" cried Subutai. "Freedom and peace for all our people—not just for princes and priests——"

"Silence, dog!" cried Zebek.

Subutai turned, savagely.

"Yet here sits a traitor, O Torgut khan—and here sit others!" he said, pointing to Zebek and Chereng and Loosang. "Men who betray our people wherever we go—men who plan to deliver us to-morrow in slavery to the Chinese khan——"

There was a terrific shouting and confusion, among the people in the crowd—little could be heard.

The holy Koubilgan leaped to his feet. His eyes blazed. There was nothing humble or holy about him now, as he stood glaring at Subutai.

"Enough!" he cried in the Torgut tongue. "Such a man has no place in the land of the Chinese khan—no place among the Torgut people——"

Ubasha rose, trembling and white.

"In whose name do you speak thus?" he said in a low voice.

There was a moment of profound silence.

"Are you Koubilgan," cried Ubasha, "or what manner of man?"

The Koubilgan stared at the khan with a terrifying smile.

"Yes, I am a true Koubilgan," he said. "But I am also Envoy of the Chinese khan."

Ubasha sank back weakly, looking around in bewilderment.

"Ah, god!" he murmured. "Can it be?"

"Are you blind?" cried Subutai. "Are you blind to their schemes and plots against our people?"

"But what can I do?" the khan said hoarsely. "What can I say?"

"Speak to the people!" cried Subutai, turning to the crowd. "Arise, people—awake! Sleep no more where the princes and priests may lead you! Speak for the path of man, to freedom——"

The crowd shouted wildly.

Ubasha listened, he trembled, his face grew white. He called for a cup of tea. Into the tea, with a nervous hand, he spilled a powder.

Subutai shook his stick at the crowd.

"We left the Tsarina to be free!" he shouted. "Are we free men or slaves? Many have died—we have come far. Is it all in vain? Speak out, Torguts! For the glory of an act is, that it shall be complete!"

"Ya-bonnah!" shouted the people. "He's right! Ya-bonnah!"

In the midst of the clamour, the Chinese Envoy pointed at Subutai.

"Seize him, someone!" he shouted. "The man's mad, he rouses the people——"

Zebek had started forward. But Subutai suddenly swayed. Blood poured down his chest, his wounds had re-opened, blood dripped from his leg. The stick fell from his hand and he pitched forward. Zebek stopped short.

The Lama Loosang stood with his golden crozier above the prostrate man. The crowd surged forward. The lama held his crozier high in the air.

"See!" he cried in a loud voice. "The hand of God has stricken him down!"

"None of your tricks!" shouted Norbo, somewhere back in the crowd. "We know what you're up to!"

"For shame!" cried someone. "The lama is right!"

A terrific hubbub broke out among the people.

"Something must be done!" said the Chinese Envoy, at Loosang' elbow. "An example must be made—the people are out of hand——"

Ubasha stared at Subutai, who was stirring. He motioned for a slave to carry the cup of tea to the wounded man. He watched Subutai, who raised his head confusedly from the floor, sip the tea.

"God help him!" muttered the khan, "I just want him to sleep. . . ."

The people, meantime, were brandishing fists and rosaries at one another, shouting violently. The lama stepped forward and called for silence.

"In the name of God!" he cried. "What would you do, Torguts—murder each other?"

The crowd slowly became silent again, listening sullenly.

"Haven't we had enough of death and killing?" cried Loosang. "Troops are at the Chinese border. What can we do? The council has decided for peace. Would you deny the will of God, would you murder your khan?"

"Never!" cried someone.

"That's not what we meant!" a soldier called out, bewildered, "We meant to harm nobody—only to take our own land——"

"Yet to take the border by force," said Loosang, "first you would have to do these things—to kill your princes and priests, as this man said——"

"That's a lie!" Norbo cried hotly.

"Shame, shame!" shouted people with rosaries.

The soldiers looked shame-faced and uncertain.

"Subutai is a hero, lama," one called, "you're twisting things——"

"A hero of war and killing," cried Loosang, "an evil hero! Listen, Torguts—think back. On Chagan-Sara, a poor mad woman saw the truth—she said certain things of this man——"

"That's right!" cried some, eagerly. "He's to blame!"

"For much he's to blame!" shouted Loosang. "For troubles and discord among our people. God has spoken, he must be punished!"

A terrible silence came over the crowd.

"Punished?" cried Norbo at last.

"Yes, punished!" cried Loosang. "So that the people may know the law still lives—God is still ruler, despite all infidels——"

The crowd stirred uneasily.

"What would you do?" Norbo called hoarsely.

"God had banished him," said Loosang. "Banish him from the Torgut horde."

Soldiers gasped, but the people with rosaries muttered.

"Yes, that's right!" they said. "Banish him, banish war from our midst——"

"Dogs!" cried Norbo. "He only fought to make you free!"

"Yes!" cried another soldier. "Only one more fight—one last fight is all we need!"

"That's the same old story," people said angrily, "the lama's right—it's time to listen to God——"

"Peace!" cried the lama, spreading his arms wide. "The true man of God is a hero of peace. Submit to God's will, O Torguts! Go in peace!"

The people with rosaries bowed their heads and prayed fervently. The guards pressed forward, trying to clear the crowd away. The pious and humble folks retreated,

murmuring prayers, drifting off into the darkness beyond the fires. The guards prodded laggards with their lances. People slowly gave way. There was no more to see—nothing more they could do. Norbo and some of the soldiers withdrew angrily from the crowd. People went to tell others of what had occurred. The crowd gradually disappeared.

Dawn was near, the sky was already turning blue, the great fires were dying.

Subutai still lay on the floor. Zebek had bound the warrior's arms over his blood-stained chest with cowhide thongs. Subutai still slept.

"Come, these are the terms!" the Chinese Envoy said to Ubasha. "There's not much time——"

"They're worse than the Tsarina's terms!" Erranpal said gloomily.

Ubasha shivered in the chill of dawn. Sweat stood on his brow. Finally he said in a tremulous voice :

"For the good of the people——"

"Yes?"

"I agree."

"And Subutai?" said Loosang.

Ubasha looked at the drugged and wounded soldier.

"I give him up," he said hoarsely.

Erranpal sighed heavily and got to his feet—Chereng yawned.

Zebek prodded Subutai with his foot and made some comment to Loosang. But Loosang, with a contemptuous shrug, followed the Chinese Envoy from the council tent.

They left the khan sitting alone in the blue pavilion, under the thin and lonely moon. Ubasha sat staring at the man who slept on the floor with his arms bound. The fires died, the light of dawn began to whiten the air.

"It's best," the khan murmured, "best for the people——"

At length Subutai stirred, he struggled and at last managed

to sit up. He stared around in confusion. Then he saw the khan sitting near-by in the ghostly dark.

Ubasha rose and came toward Subutai. Several times he started to speak, several times he bent as though to loosen the thongs. All the while, his eyes kept staring uncertainly at Subutai's.

"Was it true?" he said at last, desperately. "Did she speak the truth?"

Subutai said nothing. He looked at the khan with wondering eyes, like the eyes of a man who can see many things, even in sleep—like the eyes of a man already dead, yet filled with an unquenchable light. The khan fled from the blue pavilion.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Dawn came slowly over the great mountains that bordered Djungaria. It was the morning of September 8, 1771. The sun began to sparkle redly on the snowy peak of Khan Tengri, towering above the mist.

On the plain it was still dark.

The Torguts waited silently in the shadow of the dark steep walls of their ancient homeland. . . . They were only a remnant of the mighty host who had faced the rising sun on January 6 and followed a cannon-ball east from the Volga steppe. Two hundred thousand people lay dead, between the plains of Bish-Uba and Balkasch. Nearly all the carts and animals were gone. The people were weary and ragged and homeless, waiting in an uneasy silence on the shadowy land.

Last night the wild shouts, the leaping fires, had flamed like the last blaze of their unquenchable will for freedom that had brought them three thousand miles over the earth. But now, in the dawn, thin and bitter shafts of smoke rose from the dying embers into the cold and silver air.

In the dawn it seemed, what was it they had willed—what was freedom itself? The burning vision seemed quenched at last, the will and hope were gone. In the dawn it seemed that freedom was a long cold path, without end.

The people spoke in whispers of Subutai—the hero whose path they could no longer follow, whose voice they could no longer hear.

The path into Djungaria was dark.

The shadow had lifted, for eight blazing months, and now it was closing over them again. Like the shadow of oppression from which they had wakened and fled, now the great shadow of the mountainous land lay over them where they stood on the plain.

Yet the sky grew brighter. Great rolling waves of light came over the Tian Shan range. Over the towering peaks the sun was rising.

All the lamas of the horde, mounted, armed with cymbals and horns, raised their eyes in front of the waiting people.

A quiet like death lay over the land.

Then the drums began beating. Cymbals clashed. The sonorous horns were sounded.

"It has arisen, it has arisen ! the sun of happiness has risen !" chanted the lamas, shrill and hysterical, beating their cymbals and drums. "O Goddess Marici, bless us and fulfil our desires ! Protect us, O Buddha, from all the eight fears—of foes, robbers, wild beasts, snakes and poisons, weapons, fire, water, and high precipices !"

The high and inaccessible peak of Khan Tengri glistened in the stronger light. The people gazed upward, as though with a last regret, a last vision of freedom. The animals stirred. The people lowered their eyes again. The lamas had finished their mantras. Morning had come.

Yet no signal was given to move. Instead, the lamas all turned and faced the horde, holding their golden croziers high in the sunlight, as though barring the way. Those who had drums continued to beat them, ominously. The Lama Loosang, in the centre, looked back.

The khan and Subutai stood in the centre of the horde.

To one side a troop of soldiers muttered and scowled. Norbo's sword gleamed in the first rays of sunlight ; his eyes glowed in his great dark face like his glittering sword. Near-by, Zebek twisted a lance in his sweating palm, he watched with blood-shot eyes. Cedar-chab stood quiet

and erect in her poor clothes, smiling at Subutai with a wondering gaze. All about her the Turkish slaves were kneeling.

Subutai, whose arms were still bound tightly over the clots of blood on his chest, looked at the khan steadily with the same curious light in his eyes.

Ubasha's great white horse sniffed the morning air impatiently.

The khan wet his lips.

"Now I strike your name from the White Bone!" he said in a loud and unnatural voice. "And I strike your name from the rolls of the Torgut people——"

He faltered.

Near-by the soldiers stirred uneasily. Norbo gripped his sword.

Far ahead, the Lama Loosang raised his crozier high in the golden air, warningly.

"God help me, I can do no other!" Ubasha cried desperately. "Go where you will, soldier—take my horse——"

Norbo could remain quiet no longer.

"For god's sake!" he shouted hoarsely. "Free his arms, at the least!"

Subutai turned.

"Not the khan, not even death," he said, "now only the people can free them."

He turned, and with the dawn and the glittering pinnacle at his back, facing the Torgut horde, facing toward the still dark and silent west out of which they had come, from the distant Volga lands of Russia.

"Yet the people themselves shall never be free, nowhere they live on the earth," he cried then, in a clear and fearless voice—"until first they cut all the bonds that oppress men, among their own brothers!"

And with a mighty leap, in spite of his bound arms and his wounds, he sprang to the back of the great white horse.

"Go now, Subutai!" cried the khan, sobbing bitterly. "True hero—son of the Torgut people——"

From the ranks of the slaves, suddenly Cedar-chab came running and leaped up behind Subutai. And he raised his face to the blue sky, laughing and free at last. She clung to him, with her braids flying in the wind, riding as they had in childhood.

On the back of the great white horse, they sped off towards the east.

Norbo shouted to the soldiers, pointing toward Subutai and the Chinese lines at Chara Pen. He whirled his sword and dashed forward. The men wavered, a few started to follow. But Zebek's lance whizzed through the air. Norbo spun around, with the great lance quivering in his back—he charged toward Zebek with upraised sword. Zebek waited, with a dark and brooding look on his face. The upraised sword fell at his feet. Norbo toppled dead to the ground.

The lamas advanced toward the horde, holding their croziers like bars.

The soldiers muttered, they scowled at Zebek—but they remained where they were.

Now the sunlight came goldenly down the pass of Chara Pen—it clove the distant waters of the Ili, that tumbled from Djungaria—it struck on the burnished arms of the Chinese troops.

Smaller and smaller grew the white horse, speeding toward Chara Pen. Straight toward the pass flew Cedar-chab and Subutai, dwindling like birds soaring in some inaccessible sky.

The people stared toward the east, they gasped—voices cried out. Would they burst through the Chinese lines? would the border fly open like the arms of the Torgut mother-land, now, in their need—would the Torguts yet be free? A mist of hope brightened all eyes a moment, emotion tightened their throats—the people stared, fascinated, toward the east.

In the Chinese lines, the archers strung their great bows with musical arrows. *The song coming to get me*, these arrows were called. They were long flutes of warning, they sang musically as they whirled through the air.

In the morning sky stood the white peak, higher than all—below flowed the silver stream in the golden light.

It was a beautiful day, the arrows sang beautifully in the clear still air.

The great white horse burst the lines at Chara Pen. But an arrow lodged in his throat, like a song silenced. And a long arrow transfixing the hearts of Subutai and Cedar-chab, joined at last by death. In the water of the Ili they fell, in their ancient land, under the white peak and sky like a blue bubble of hope above. The enchantment of morning was burst.

The people shuddered, a sigh passed through the horde. People stirred, animals moved. The lamas turned pompously and led the way, preceding the soldiers and khan and all the princes and people, leading the way toward Chara Pen. The small bands of animals were docile and quiet; the rickety carts creaked in the silence that lay over the land. The people lowered their eyes, plodding like people drowned in a bitter dream.

"Which was the dream, and which the waking?" thought old Bagha, raising his eyes to the mighty peak. "Is it only a dream, then, to hope living men may freely inhabit the skies of Khan Tengri?"

The soldiers rode quietly now.

"He was a mighty hero," said one. "His eyes were like the sun. His voice made the lamas and princes tremble. He could leap over the highest peaks of all."

"Yes, nothing could kill him," said another. "He died of his own will, to make us remember."

"Comrade, he folded his arms and they bound him. . . . But his arms will be mightier than theirs, even in death."

Zebek was one of the first to approach the border at Chara Pen. He rode alone, sullen and brooding. None looked at him ; all seemed to shun him as though he were dead—as though, in their midst, he had been cast out of the horde. He approached the border guard with desperate arrogance, scowling darkly at the Chinese troops.

“ Your weapons ! ” said the Chinese general, Ileton, who stood with the Chinese Envoy at Chara Pen.

The troops, their ranks of lances and swords glinting in rays of sunlight under the steep rock walls of the pass, stared impassively at the bitter and arrogant Torgut prince.

The Chinese general said :

“ Kneel to the Dalai Lama, Torgut—swear vassalage to Kien Lung, Khan of Khans, Lord of China and Tibet and Djungaria ! ”

Zebek’s face twisted darkly, he turned to the Koubilgan—but the Chinese Envoy looked back at him with cold and impatient eyes.

“ You’re the same as all others—do as you’re told ! ” he said. “ As for your difference . . . the Chinese Khan will remember you—later perhaps.”

Passing into their ancient land, thus, kneeling and delivering over their weapons and freedom, the soldiers went bitterly. A few stared at the Chinese troops in angry surprise. There seemed not more than two thousand men garrisoned at Chara Pen. A feeling of final betrayal—that here the Torguts might somehow have fought their last battle and won—this feeling pierced all hearts with bitter anguish. Heavily the soldiers rose from their knees, muttering, but disarmed—captives in the Torgut homeland.

Behind them came the thousands of people and animals, hoshun after hoshun, in a slow and sombre procession.

They looked up at the rocky walls of the mountains, now close at hand. They stared at the broad pass through which the Ili flowed down. They watched the Chinese soldiers with curiosity while waiting their turn to kneel.

"Well, neighbour," one said at last, with a heavy sigh, "we're home."

"Yes, it's so—but I heard they're going to make us older men serve in the Chinese Army, too."

"Ah, but the Tsarina tried, neighbour !"

"Yes, but look what we came to ! . . . Besides, there's nowhere to go, from here."

"Well, all I can say is—I hope we don't have to wear those silly clothes !" the first man said reluctantly, pointing to the Chinese garrison.

Other people came, driving their meagre herds and flocks. Those who had no animals tried to cheer themselves, saying :

"I understand the Chinese Khan has promised us each a cow and ten sheep."

"Yes—but he wants back two cows and twenty sheep, each year, neighbour !"

"Why worry ? It won't be a year for a time yet."

"Listen !" said another, eagerly. "I hear that another Chinese general, Chouhédé, is waiting at Ouché with animals and clothes and food for all !"

"Ah !" someone said cynically. "You never get something for nothing, neighbour——"

"Just the same," the other retorted, "it's better than we got from anyone else !"

"Nevertheless, neighbour, I don't like it—we should have taken what we want !" he said in a whisper. "Isn't it so ?"

"Shh, look out, man—or they'll give you nothing !"

So the people came, entering Djungaria at last, beginning to throng in the rocky pass above Chara Pen, climbing slowly toward the Yulduz Plateau.

And last of all, on foot and alone, came the Torgut Khan, Ubasha.

He walked with a bowed and sombre head. He thought that somehow, if he'd only known, he might have saved his people their freedom. . . . Yet had they freedom, ever ? He thought of Cedar-chab, and for a moment he thought he

understood what she meant. She had discarded the silk gown of rank, she had taken the clothes of the poor—even of a slave.

Ubasha frowned.

Ah then ! he thought. Could he have discarded his own rank and become strong enough, somehow, to lead his people ? His hands trembled, he sighed deeply. No matter what clothes he wore, he was the captive of his own futile longing for power among the princes, and fame in history. Nothing would have been changed—he had seen it for a moment last night. Then had been his last chance, when Subutai spoke, to speak for the people himself. Always, he thought bitterly, he had pretended to act for the people but it had always been, basically, for himself. In that moment, he knew what Subutai had meant, better even than Subutai. . . . To speak for the people meant, surely, to deny the princes and priests—to deny himself. Thus he had chosen, knowing this, to deny Subutai and deliver him over to death.

Subutai's eyes remained in his mind.

"Ah, yes," Ubasha muttered, "Cedar-chab was only an excuse—it was never the truth——"

He walked slowly in the wake of his people, thinking these things. Suddenly he knew that he himself was as distant from his own people as Chereng, or Zebek, or the Lama Loosang. He groped his way among rocks, he went toward the Chinese troops where they waited for him to come and kneel in the pass.

"Yes !" he whispered. "The man to lead our people to freedom was you, Subutai. . . . And I sent you to death, instead."

The khan fell to his knees. But it seemed that he was bowing his head for forgiveness—not in submission, but penance—bending his head in grief. . . .

High up the tortuous and rocky pass—so high that he already seemed inaccessible as the snow peaks of heaven—

the Lama Loosang looked down on the Torgut horde, crawling and struggling up from below like a great mass of insects on the steep and rocky pass.

"God's will!" Loosang murmured, with downcast eyes.

But where the Ili flowed, through the Golden Saddle, at the foot of the pass, the khan stood for another moment, thinking, as though he had heard the lama's words:

"Surely, it's not God's will, that men should live like slaves among their brothers. This is the will of a few men, truly, an evil thing. For the will of God, who made all men, is that by their own will they be free——"

Where the Ili flowed, like sleepers in a sweet and melancholy dream, lay Subutai and Cedar-chab. Far above them towered the white and sparkling peak. Their eyes, still filled with a curious light of wonder, were turned up to the glittering summit.

"Sleep on!" murmured Ubasha softly. "For some day you shall wake again. . . . For what you see will never be dead, but live for ever——"

The Torgut people, slowly, tortuously, crawled up the dark rocky pass to their ancient land.

"So that some day," cried Ubasha desperately, "the bodies of men may climb to those lofty peaks where their spirits have already soared. . . . Where man may come to the free and peaceful end of his long migration, travelled since the beginning of time."

the Ming Dynasty. Early in the seventeenth century, the Khalka Mongols were conquered by the Manchus, who then entered China in 1644 and overthrew the Ming Dynasty.

But the Western Mongols, including the Torguts, remained free. In 1640 a Torgut Khan, Batur, recognizing the Manchu threat to the pastoral culture and freedom of his people, brought all the Western Mongolians together, later including the Khalkas, in what was known as the Oirat (called Eleuth, by the Chinese), or People's Federation. By 1745 this Mongolian Federation had achieved such broad strength that it could contest matters directly with the Manchu Dynasty. Under Galdan Khan, a Torgut descendant of Batur, a great army of the Mongolians besieged the capital of the Chinese Empire, Peking. This was in the early years of the reign of Kien Lung, fourth of the Manchu Emperors.

But a civil war, cleverly instigated by Kien Lung, broke out at home between Djungaria and Tibet. This forced the army of the People's Federation to lift its siege of Peking. Galdan soon subdued the disruptive revolt at home, but he was killed a short time later in another revolt sponsored by Kien Lung, among the Khalka Mongols to the north-east of Djungaria.

And in 1758 the Chinese Emperor, Kien Lung, finally invaded Djungaria, the last stronghold of Mongolian freedom ; and there he massacred the whole population of more than half a million men, women, and children.

2

Yet all the Torgut Mongols were not killed in this massacre.

In 1628, because the grass-lands of Djungaria had become too densely settled, a large branch of the Torgut Banner, under a chieftain known as Ho-Orluk, had left their native

country and travelled westward in search of new pastures. First they lived near the Aral Sea. And then they moved farther west, to the lands north of the Caspian Sea, near the Volga River.

These Volga lands had been previously occupied, in the early part of the thirteenth century, by Mongols and Turks under a grandson of Genghis Khan, who established the Golden Horde at Serai, now known as Saratov. From here, they ruled the grand-dukes and princes of Poland and Russia, until 1495. In that year the Russians, under the grand-duke of Moscow, destroyed the Golden Horde and drove the people from the land.

The Torguts, under Ho-Orluk, occupied this deserted Volga region.

Ho-Orluk's great-grandson, the Khan Ayouka, established the Torgut sovereignty widely and firmly throughout these lands. He was courted as an equal by the Russian Tsar and the Chinese Emperor, each of whom wished to gain the Torguts as an ally against the other. But after the death of Ayouka, the lands and freedom of the Torgut Mongols were slowly encroached upon by the expanding Russian Empire.

Forts were built on the Volga and the Jaik (now known as the Ural River), encircling the Torgut pastures. Prisoners and adventurers, gathered from all corners of the Russian Empire, were sent south to garrison these forts. These soldiers were called Cossacks, a name derived from the savage barbarians who lived near the Ural Mountains, the Kazaks of the Kirghiz Horde. Also, German colonists were brought to the Volga, principally in the vicinity of Sarepta, to engage in agriculture and manufacture. Towns and farms began to girdle the Torgut land.

Under Catherine the Second—whose reign as Tsarina began in 1762 with the murder of her husband, grandson of Peter the Great—the situation rapidly became acute. Taxes levied on the Torguts were steeply increased. Military

conscription was instituted on a wide basis, and a system of hostages was enforced. The people were required to buy many things from the Russians which formerly they had made themselves, or had done without. The Torguts, once free and prosperous, were rapidly being reduced to colonial poverty and serfdom by such imperialistic methods.

In addition, the Tsarina took advantage of a political conflict among the Torguts to undermine the authority of their khan.

Donduk Taishi, grandson of Ayouka, died in 1761. His son Ubasha, then barely eighteen years of age, was elected khan by a large majority. But Ubasha's cousin Zebek, who wished to be khan, stirred up discontent among the Torgut princes.

The question was not only one of the succession. Zebek, five years older than his cousin Ubasha, was an inveterate gambler and spendthrift. In order to recoup his fortunes, he contended that the Torgut lands should be divided among the princes, just as the Russian grand-dukes and princes had done with the communal lands of the Russian people.

The young khan, Ubasha, and most of the older princes maintained that the pasture-lands should be owned by all the Torgut people in common, just as they had always been from ancient times on down to the present.

Finally Zebek went to the Tsarina, pleading his case. She had already ratified the election of Ubasha. But she created a Torgut Council to limit the power of the khan, and she appointed Zebek as the president of this council. She advised Zebek to forget the question of land ownership for the time. She may also have promised to see that Zebek became khan in place of Ubasha at some later date. Zebek, when he turned against the Tsarina in 1770, claimed that she had broken many promises—and perhaps this was one.

Catherine the Great also encouraged a conflict between the Shamanite and Buddhist priests among the tolerant Torguts, and she tried to force the Greek Orthodox faith on

the people. Just as the Manchu Emperors of China at an earlier date had used the Buddhist religion to undermine the ancient Shamanistic independence of the Torguts in Djungaria, so now the Tsarina sought to bring the Volga Torguts under a dual control of the Russian Church and Empire. She knew that if the Buddhist hierarchy remained powerful among the Torguts, their allegiance to Russia would always be nominal—and might easily be broken.

Again, in the classical pattern of imperialism, she set all the colonial peoples, on the southern and eastern borders of Russia, against one another in order to weaken them and keep them in subjection. In 1768 she set the Torguts against the Krim Turks, who lived on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The Torguts, thus forced to act as a buffer-state for the Tsarina's Empire, were largely responsible for the Russian victory over the Turks. And then, in order to keep the triumphant Torguts in check, she incited the Kirghiz and Bashkirs of the Urals to raid and plunder the Torgut Horde—fanning the Moslem fanaticism of these people against the Buddhist Mongolians, rousing the envy of these impoverished peoples against the wealthier Torgut shepherds of the Volga steppes.

Finally, Catherine appointed a vain and arrogant man, Kichinskoi, as Grand Commissioner to the Torguts, granting him despotic power over not only the khan but over the Torgut Council as well.

Kichinskoi began to tax and oppress the people with a heavy hand. A rumour that the Torguts were being goaded to the point of rebellion and flight soon reached Beketov, Governor of Astrakan Province. But when Beketov criticized the Torgut Commissioner, mentioning this rumour, Kichinskoi replied that the Torguts might be desperate as they pleased—but that they were like a bear on a chain and could merely growl in rage at their master. To show his contempt for all rumours of unrest, Kichinskoi levied still higher taxes and military demands on the Torguts.

In the summer of 1770, a message came from the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the Living Buddha. He advised the Torgut Horde that, according to his Buddhist astrologers, the following winter would be a fortuitous time for flight. He also mentioned that the Chinese Emperor, Kien Lung, was eager for the Volga Torguts to return to their ancient land of Djungaria, uninhabited since the massacre of 1758, where he would welcome them as free men and allies. This news was religiously kept from the Torgut people—for, in spite of Kichinskoi and the Tsarina, few people would relish the prospect of travelling across two or three thousand miles of unknown country.

In the fall of 1770, the Kirghiz and Bashkirs—dupes of the Tsarina's imperial policy—crossed the Jaik River and plundered the Torguts more heavily than ever before. Their excesses now roused the Tsarina's concern. For she saw that if the Kirghiz took too heavy a toll of the Torgut wealth, her own source of revenues would be seriously impaired. Consequently, acting on the advice of Kichinskoi, Catherine the Great armed the Torguts with Russian muskets and two brass cannon and encouraged them to make a military expedition against the Kirghiz.

On January 3, 1771, more than fifty thousand men of the Torgut Banner set out for the east. But they never met the Kirghiz. Instead, on January 5 they assembled in a great gathering on the frozen steppes near Lake Bish-Uba. And there, having suffered oppression for long, they determined to leave the Volga pastures—together with their four hundred thousands of people and five millions of animals—and to seek freedom and peace in some other land.

3

The great Torgut migration began at dawn on January 6, and ended eight months later, September 8, 1771. Much of

what happened between these two dates is unknown. The exact route taken by the Torguts, returning from the Volga River to the Tian Shan Mountains of Djungaria, is a matter of some conjecture. Even the numbers of people and animals involved—particularly, the estimate of losses during the migration—are in doubt.

The five principal documents based directly on the migration are filled with contradictions, with bias and inaccuracy.

The Adventures of Mikhailov, a Russian Captive among the Kalmucs, Kirghiz, and Kiwenses is an eye-witness account. It was written by a semi-literate Cossack who was carried as hostage part way by the Torguts. Vasilii Mikhailov had little love for his captors, and he wrote with a minimum of factual data and human understanding.

It was upon Michailov's memoirs, largely, that the German historian, B. Bergmann, based his four-volume work entitled *Nomadische Streifereien unter den Kalmucken*. Similarly, Sir George Staunton (the Earl of Macartney), who was English Ambassador to China, 1798-1801, based the passages dealing with the migration in his *Authentic Account of an Embassy to China* upon an equally unreliable source, a memoir written by the Emperor Kien Lung.

Kien Lung, fourth Manchu Emperor of China, the same man who massacred all of the Djungarian Torguts in 1758, was still the ruler of China when the migration from the Volga occurred, in 1771. Ten years later the Torgut prince, Zebek-Dordzhi, embittered cousin of Ubasha Khan, visited the Chinese Court. Much of the story of the migration, as Kien Lung described it, was derived from this dissident prince. The Chinese Emperor coloured the already unreliable material to suit his own purpose. In writing his *Transmigration of the Tourgouths* (translated into the French by his Jesuit adviser, Father Amiot), Kien Lung naturally presented his own part in the tragedy euphemistically, to say the least, picturing his oppressive reception of the

Torguts as a benevolent protectorate over a helpless and disorganized people.

In 1826, Thomas De Quincey published his essay *Revolt of the Kalmucks, or, Flight of a Tatar Tribe*. Although De Quincey stubbornly refused to divulge his sources, it seems likely that he drew most of his material from Bergmann and Macartney. He used the term *Kalmuck*, a Turkish name for the Torguts, following the style of Michailov and Bergmann; he also copies many other terms, hypotheses, and inaccuracies which Bergmann inherited from the Cossack hostage. And in describing the entry of the Torguts into China, De Quincey speaks of Kien Lung watching the arrival from "his hunting lodge near Zhe Ho." This fabulous conception undoubtedly derives from a mis-reading of Macartney's memoir. It was at Jehol, the Manchu summer capital of the Chinese Emperors, that the Earl of Macartney met Father Amiot, Kien Lung's translator, from whom he learned Kien Lung's story of the Torguts. This error on De Quincey's part somehow betrayed him into a fantastic notion of where the migration really ended, and under what circumstances; and in concluding his essay, De Quincey adopts the Macartney-Amiot-Kien Lung estimate of the Chinese Emperor's benevolence. Yet in spite of errors, in spite of his tendency to exaggeration and melodrama, this essay of De Quincey, written by a creative and imaginative man, is by far the most human, the most sympathetic, and the most complete, of all the five works which deal directly with the Torgut migration.

In certain instances, therefore—where I have been in doubt, and where De Quincey offers a reasonable hypothesis—I have more or less followed the English essayist. I am also indebted to many books and scholars for a small wealth of scattered references out of which—by crossing them like a botanist, so to speak—I hope I have been able to draw a fair element of truth. With the help and advice of my friend, Bill Whitman III, I have somewhat overcome certain

ethnological and anthropological difficulties which faced me in reconstructing the Torgut migration as a real and human event. And in working out the route followed by the Torguts, I finally determined this (to my own satisfaction, at least) through studying a set of large-scale Russian maps in the light of all the facts I had been able to assemble by research.

When I first began to gather material for this novel, I was disappointed to find that historians—men like Boulger and Howorth, for instance—dealt with the Torgut migration in a mere page or two. This was the last great mass movement of a whole people, with all their animals and goods, occurring with the same vast sweep that marked the great migrations before historical times. It seemed to me that, occurring almost in our own day and age, as it did, such an opportunity for modern study of an archaic phenomenon should have been welcomed by historians.

Yet even had the facts and details been available, it is doubtful that the writers of history would have treated the Torgut migration at greater length. For to the historian, more often than not, the poetic skill of a Kien Lung, or the idiosyncrasies of a Catherine the Great, seem to possess far greater significance than the instinctive motion of a people toward freedom. And the flight and suffering of this pastoral people seemed to have little or no direct effect on the course of either of the great empires between whose expanding borders the migration occurred.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the time of the Torgut migration, the vast regions of Central Asia were a political no-man's-land, an historical backwoods. There had been a time—notably the great Caravan Era between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries—when these remote lands were the cross-roads between two worlds. But with the discovery of sea-routes between Europe and the East, the cities and deserts and caravan roads of Central Asia lost their importance in world trade and world history. This

whole great area became a dark and forgotten place where savage tribes struggled for existence—and where the Manchu and Romanov Dynasties fought barbarically for power.

In these Dark Ages of Central Asia, then, the heart-breaking passage of the Torgut Mongols from Russia to China seemed, perhaps, as meaningless and ephemeral—though as fascinating, too—as the flash of a meteor through the night sky.

4

But there was a meaning, then as now.

The Torguts were an archaic people, so to speak, a nomadic people belonging to the past. They lived in a time when our modern world was beginning to evolve with rapidity everywhere on the earth. The dwindling of the grass-lands, an historical process that Genghis tried to halt with sword and law, had reached a point where, like a checkmate, there was only one last move the Torguts could make—and that one, a move to ultimate extinction. They forgot the proverb of Genghis Khan (that *nothing can return as it was*) when they fled symbolically to the original home of their ancient way of life.

They tried to escape the social and historical change which was sweeping almost every people, imperial and colonial, in their time. The khan, the princes, the priests, the rich, the poor—all were caught in the same ferment that caused the Pugatchev Rebellion of 1775, the great American and French Revolutions, the whole series of social revolutions, of imperial conquests, of colonial revolts, that have continued down to our own time at an accelerated rate. By tearing themselves away from their context in the social and economic fabric of the world, they did not and could not tear themselves free, in truth—but could only turn the ferment of struggle and change inward, causing decay rather than growth. And in their long bitter flight, each

class of this great people—migrating across the continental divide of modern history, so to speak—became so enfeebled, dead-locked in the historical struggle they so dimly understood, that the Buddhist hierarchy was able, almost by default, to deliver the Torgut people into the power of Kien Lung and the Dalai Lama of Tibet.

In the years following the migration, the Torgut numbers slowly dwindled. The Chinese Emperors sent farmers to cultivate the river-lands and valleys of Djungaria. The country, now become the Sinkiang Province of the Chinese Empire, was garrisoned by criminals and adventurers from all parts of China. The Torguts were taxed heavily by Church and State, and they were conscripted to fight the border wars of the Celestial Emperors. For nearly a hundred years, wave after wave of Mohammedan attacks burst across the plains of the Ili River and up the Djungarian passes. The Emperor, like the Tsarina before him, was not averse to pitting the Moslems against the Buddhists, the Torguts against the savage and improverished tribes of Central Asia. The once great and independent Banner of Torgut Mongols dwindled, until barely ten thousand people of this ancient stock were left on earth.

Yet for these ten thousand Djungarian Torguts living to-day, the goal of freedom which they never forgot is now within reach. The generations of imperialistic exploitation of captive and colonial peoples are begetting their own end. Everywhere the democratic peoples of the world are rousing to a final effort. History and life are on the side of humanity, not of the betrayers and oppressors of man. Side by side with their Chinese brothers of Sinkiang, the Torgut Mongols to-day are fighting the Japanese invaders of China. And the Torguts, along with the rest of the world now engaged in a final battle for freedom, will ultimately triumph—will ultimately justify, thus, the long and heroic struggle, the disaster and tragedy, not only of their own but of all human history.

GLOSSARY

and note on the Torgut language



AIMAK, a semi-military and administrative jurisdiction within the *ulus*. It is usually composed of fifty to one hundred *hoshuns*.

ARGOL, dried animal dung used as fuel. Cattle droppings are preferred to those of the horse, because they make a hotter fire. *Argols*, in general, are preferred to wood, even where wood abounds, since they burn longer and more quietly, and with a less corrosive smoke than wood.

BANNER, one of the principal sub-divisions of the Mongolian Order as established by Genghis Khan. It is primarily a military category. The Torguts were originally one of twenty-two Mongolian *Banners*.

BICHIK, the Torgut bible ; a book embodying the moral precepts, civil laws, et cetera, of the Mongols. It was adopted in 1640, at the time that the People's (*Oirat*, which appears as *Eleuth* in Chinese, where the *l* approximates the *r*) Federation of Mongolians was formed. The Great Bone (*Ulang Yassa*) of Genghis Khan's time had fallen into disuse. The *Bichik*, which took its place, was far less strict than its predecessor, granting an alternative of heavy fines to capital punishment for infringement of certain laws, and lessening penalties for other crimes. For instance, under the *Bichik* the punishment

for "seizing the breasts of a girl over ten" was lessened to a "sharp stroke on the testicles," and the law regarding adultery was amended so that the aggrieved (husband) might optionally accept certain payments in place of dis-embowelling the offender. On the other hand, even in the *Bichik* the penalty for "seizure of an unwilling woman, or of an unmarried girl for whom the *Kalim* has not been paid" was ostracism and death. *Bichik* means The Book. The full name of these Regulations of 1640 was *Tsaadjin Bichik*, The Holy Book.

BLACK BONE, see *Khara Yassa*.

BUDDHISM, a religion founded in the Sixth Century B.C. by Siddhatta Gautama. This religion was known to Genghis Khan, who maintained friendly relations with all religions "so as to be surely acceptable to God." The Chinese Emperors, particularly the Manchus, favoured Buddhism in order to gain a broader and deeper control over the people of Tibet and Central Asia. But the Torgut Mongols merely viewed Buddhism as one religion among many, although it gradually came to be a fairly universal faith. In the Seventeenth Century, a Djungarian Torgut, Tseren Dondob, conquered Tibet and effected a reform in the Buddhist hierarchy, replacing the Red Hat Lamas with the Dalai Lama and the Yellow Hats. Buddhism did not become a state religion among the Torgut Mongols until their re-entry to Djungaria as a subject-people to the Chinese Emperor.

CHAGAN, white.

CHAGAN-SARA, the White Month, approximating February, the first month of the Torgut calendar year. The term is also used for the festival which ushers in the month and the New Year.

CHAGAN YASSA, White Bone, a social classification among the Mongols, to which all the *khans* and princes belonged, as well as many of the *darkans* (tax collectors) and some of the *saissangs* and generals, who, if they came originally from the Black Bone, were sometimes made People of the White Bone for various deeds and services. The clergy comprised a separate class, together with scholars and professional people such as doctors and lawyers, who were tax-free. Originally, the social and economic distinctions between White and Black Bone were not very pronounced, and a type of patriarchal and pastoral democracy prevailed. But with the capture of slaves and the introduction of a class of servants and agricultural serfs under the princes and priests, social and economic distinctions appeared at an accelerated pace. Many of the Black Bone people were reduced to poverty and virtual serfdom by the wealthy, the priests and princes, who gradually usurped the patriarchal authority of the khan. In the case of the Torgut Mongols on the Volga, this process was already well begun by 1771, with the *Khan* and the Black Bone people tending to group together against the encroachment of the princes and priests, whose allies were the wealthier shepherds. But the broader question—the freedom of the whole people against Tsarist Imperialism—was so acute that the usurpers within the Torgut *horde* were not clearly seen for what they were; and the princes and high priests were able, largely, to make their own increasing oppression seem part and parcel of the Tsarist oppression—an “outside power of evil” which would disappear when once the Torguts were free of the Tsarina’s yoke. The prolonged suffering and heavy loss of the Torgut migration served to deepen and to make more explicit the conflict between the princes and the people, but at the same time a breach between the people and the khan. Thus, dubious of

all their leaders, the people seemed on the very threshold of social revolution against class oppression and misleadership. But the last terrible stage of their migration so thoroughly exhausted and demoralized them, that it was a disillusioned rather than a revolutionary people who were finally delivered into the power of the Chinese Emperor—and into the power of the Buddhist hierarchy and a rigid, far more oppressive class system than before, as well.

CHU, a river in Central Asia which was called in ancient times the Jaxartes.

DEMCHI, a lesser administrative official, usually with authority over several *hoshuns*.

DERISUN, an oily plant which grows near springs and salt lakes, greenish grey in colour. Ears of bitter grain spring from its roots, which are used for fodder. Extremely poor people grind the seeds for a gruel.

DJUNGARIA, the ancient name of the Torgut homeland, situated between the Tian-Shan and the Altin Mountains in what is now Sinkiang Province of China, often called Chinese Turkestan. The name itself is a compound of two Torgut words, meaning (country of the) left hand. Since there are no words in Torgut for east and west, scholars have been somewhat confused because the word *djun* (left) is modernly employed to signify east, and they ascribe this to the fact that Tibet, home of the Dalai Lama, lies south of the Mongolian peoples. However, the Torgut Mongols were a branch of the Western Mongols, and without doubt *djun-gar* (left hand) originally signified west, not east. This, if one takes into account that the Mongols were not originally Buddhists, but shepherds and Shamanites, undoubtedly derived from their facing north, not south, both toward the Pole Star and toward the Ordu lands of the Mongolian Khans.

HORDE, in Mongolian actually *ordu*, meaning camp and later, order ; synonymous at time with *banner* ; more distinctly, a nomadic or civilian subdivision of the Mongolian people under its own *khan*, as, the Torgut *horde*.

HOSHUN, a "village" usually composed of ten to twenty *yurts*, or family dwellings, ordinarily of families related by blood and marriage, together with their servants or slaves ; the smallest administrative unit of the *horde*.

JAİK, the old name for the Ural River, changed by edict of Catherine the Second in 1775 as an aftermath of the Pugatchev Rebellion, which broke out in the Volga region shortly after the Torgut Migration.

KALAT, a loose inner or summer cloak worn by Mongolian men and women. The men's *kalat* is shorter than that of the women, and opens on the right side, whereas the gown of the married women opens in the middle. The men's cloaks, except those of the princes and priests, are usually blue ; and with the *kalat* they wear trousers stuffed into boots. The women and the rich prefer bright-coloured *kalats*, often of yellow or green or red silk. Over the *kalat*, the women frequently wear a short sleeveless jacket.

KALIM, a dowry paid to the bride's family, ranging from a few animals in the case of poor people to many thousands of animals and precious gifts in the case of extremely rich or princely marriages.

KALMUCK, (see Torgut).

KHAN, the ruler of a *horde*, as Ubasha, *Khan* of the Torgut *horde*. Among the Mongols, the *khans* of the various *hordes* must be chosen from descendants of Genghis—whose family tree, it appears, is a veritable forest.

KHAN TENGRI, the highest peak of the Tian Shan range.

This same name is also used among Mongols to designate God, meaning Lord of the Heavens. The Buddhists consider this name for God as a residue of Shamanite error.

KHARA, black.

KHARA CHAGAN, black-white, the distance at which black and white can be distinguished ; a Torgut measure of distance, approximately four miles. Distance is also measured among the Mongolians by the sound of a whistle, and in larger units by camel-days and horse-days, about thirty and fifty miles, respectively.

KHARA YASSA, Black Bone, a social classification among the Mongols ; the common people, comprising the great bulk of shepherds and servants and warriors ; occasionally a member of the Black Bone is raised to the White Bone, for performing valorous deeds or for amassing great wealth.

KUL, lake ; as *Aris Kul*, Yellow Lake.

KUM, sand ; as *Khara Kum*, Black Sand ; a desert.

LAMA, a priest of the Buddhist religion. There are four ranks of lamaism, or priesthood, among the Mongols. The Shamans, the practitioners of the ancient Mongolian worship, are members of the fourth rank. The supreme lama of all is the *Dalai Lama*, Lama of the Sea, who lives in Tibet.

SAISSANG, a military and administrative official of rank, the chieftain of an *aimak*.

SARGA, Council, a body of advisers to the *khan* ; in the case of the Torguts, the *Sarga* gradually encroached on the authority of the *khan*.

SAXAUL, a shrubby leafless tree growing in the more desert-like parts of Asia, too brittle to use as a wood, but making an excellent fire.

SHAMANISM, the ancient religion of the Mongols ; a primitive and naturalistic religion which was originally pantheistic and receptive to many gods ; it has become gradually a part of the Buddhist faith among the Mongols, just as many elements of primitive Italian or Mexican worship have been absorbed in those countries by the Roman Catholic Church.

SHULENGA, a petty official, chief administrator of a *hoshun*.

TORGUT, a tribal sub-division of the Western Mongols. The origin of the name is unknown, although Julg surmises it was originally a place-name. The Torguts do not appear in history until after the days of Wang Khan (Prester John), who was a Kerait Mongol. Scholars assume that the Torguts are a racial derivative of the Keraites. The name Kalmuck is often mistakenly applied to the Torguts, particularly the Russian or Volga Torguts, but the word Kalmuck is probably a Tataric or Turkish name. Certain scholars have advanced the idea that Kalmuck was applied derisively by the Turks, in whose language they claim it might have meant "those remaining, or left behind." On the other hand, it is possible that the Turks were merely trying to find an approximation for the Torgut description of themselves as Djungarians, "left hand" Mongols.

TUK, the triangular banner or pennon of a *khan* or imperial family ; also, the name applied to any standard of a *banner* or *horde*. The Torgut *tuk* was of blue and white, surmounted with a tiger for power, a dog for vigilance, and a serpent for wisdom.

ULANG YASSA, the Great Bone, the law code of Genghis Khan, comprising moral and military regulations, a compendium of crimes and their punishments, and containing civil and administrative measures designed to "give the earth a good shape."

ULUS, one of the main sub-divisions of a *banner* or *horde*, administered by a prince or chieftain of rank. In the Torgut *horde*, there were twenty-one uluses in all.

WHITE BONE, (see *Chagan Yassa*).

YURT, the portable circular dwelling of a Mongolian family. The Russians call these *kibitkas*, and *gar* is the true Mongolian name for a home. *Yurt* is a word of Tataric or Kirghiz origin, but it was commonly used by the Volga Torguts. The dwelling itself is made of lattice-work walls (usually of willow) which can be easily folded for travel, covered with heavy felts held in place by cords.

NOTE

The Torgut language, like all Mongolian languages, belongs to the Ural-Altaic family of agglutinative, rather than inflective, tongues. The Torgut dialect differs from the Mongolian in that it is softer, eliding the guttural sounds (g) which are used in the latter between two vowels. For instance, the Mongolian word *khagan* is, in Torgut, *khan*, whereby the vowel sound becomes softer and longer.

The spelling used in all place and personal names is as close an approximation to sound as possible. Every letter is pronounced, with the possible exception of *Kh* and *Gh*, which are used in order to suggest the guttural and somewhat aspirated nature of these consonants. All vowels are full, broad, and soft.

The Torgut literature is written in the Uighurian script, which was brought to Djungaria during the time of the Wang Khan (Prester John) by Nestorian Catholic missionaries ; the Uighurian script, in turn, is a derivative of the Syriac.

CHARACTERS



THE PRINCES

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| UBASHA (<i>Oo-bah'-sha</i>) | Khan of the Torgut Horde, descendant of Genghis Khan. |
| ZEBEK (<i>Zee'-bek</i>) | Ubasha's cousin, President of the Torgut Council. |
| BAMBAR (<i>Bam'-bar</i>) | Cousin of the khan's mother, a Torgut general. |
| CHERENG (<i>Cher'-eng</i>) | A refugee Torgut prince from Djungaria. |
| CHOKTU (<i>Chok'-too</i>) | Another Djungarian prince. |
| RABDAN (<i>Rab'-dan</i>) | Nephew of Choktu, a Torgut captain. |
| ERRANPAL (<i>Er-ran'-pal</i>) | A Khoshote prince, father-in- law of Ubasha Khan. |
| MANDERE (<i>Man-dar'</i>) | Daughter of Erranpal, wife of the khan. |
| SAND-CHAB (<i>Sand'-chob</i>) | Elder sister of the khan. |
| CEDAR-CHAB (<i>See'-dar-chob</i>) | Younger sister of the khan. |

THE PRIESTS

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| LOOSANG (<i>Loo'-sang</i>) | Son of Prince Bambar, Chief Lama of the Torgut Horde. |
| KIRIK (<i>Kear'-ik</i>) | A Buddhist lama, secretary to Ubasha Khan. |

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|---|---|
| THE KOUBILGAN (<i>Koo'-bil-gone</i>) | A Buddhist monk, a holy pilgrim from Tibet. |
| BAGHA (<i>Bagh'-a</i>) | A Shaman wizard-priest. |

THE PEOPLE

| | |
|--|--|
| MOMOTUBASH (<i>Mo-mo'-too-bosh</i>) | A Torgut General. |
| TEMURU (<i>Te-moo'-roo</i>) | Another general. |
| SUBUTAI (<i>Soo'-boo-tye</i>) | Son of Temuru, a Torgut captain. |
| GRANDMA | Mother of Temuru. |
| GEDESU (<i>Geh'-deh-soo</i>) | Another son of Temuru, a wealthy shepherd. |
| GHASHUN (<i>Gah'-shoon</i>) | Wife of Gedesu. |
| KHOOSHIN (<i>Koo'-chin</i>) | Father of Ghashun. |
| MERGHEN (<i>Mur'-gen</i>) | Herdsmen for Gedesu. |
| SHAMBA (<i>Sham'-ba</i>) | Chief herdsman for Ubasha Khan. |
| YELDEN (<i>Yel'-den</i>) | A Torgut shepherd. |
| NORBO (<i>Nor'-bo</i>) | An impoverished shepherd, a warrior and atheist. |
| TULUKU (<i>Too'-loo-koo</i>) | A Torgut warrior, a Buddhist. |
| BATU (<i>Bah'-too</i>) | Another Torgut warrior, a Shamanite. |
| TENEK (<i>Teh'-nek</i>) | A simple-minded hunch-back. |
| LEV ZOLOTSKY (<i>Zo-lot'-sky</i>) | A Jewish slave owned by Prince Zebek. |

THE ENEMIES

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| CAPTAIN DUDIN (<i>Doo'-deen</i>) | Cossack officer, held as hostage by Zebek. |
|------------------------------------|--|

| | |
|--|---|
| VASILOV (<i>Vah-seel'-ov</i>) | Cossack hostage, friend of the Torgut captain, Subutai. |
| LIEUTENANT MICHAILOV (<i>Mi-kile'-ov</i>) | Held as hostage by Ubasha Khan. |
| THE GOVERNOR OF FORT | |
| KOULAGINA (<i>Koo-lah'-geen-a</i>) | |
| LIEUTENANT GALINSKY (<i>Gah-leen'-sky</i>) | Envoy from the Russian Army. |
| BERAN (<i>Bay-ran'</i>) | A Kirghiz-Kazak prince and warrior. |
| GENERAL ILETON (<i>Ee'-leh-tawn</i>) | Commander of the Chinese Army at Chara Pen. |

THE POWERS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| CATHERINE THE SECOND | Tsarina of the Russian Empire. |
| KICHINSKOI (<i>Ki-cheen'-skoi</i>) | Grand Commissioner to the Torgut Horde. |
| BEKETOV (<i>Beh-keh-tov'</i>) | Governor of Astrakhan Province in Russia. |
| GENERAL TRAUBENBERG | Commander of the Russian Army at Orenberg. |
| NURALI (<i>Noo-rah'-lee</i>) | Khan of the Kirghiz of the Little Horde. |
| ERALI (<i>Eh-rah'-lee</i>) | Khan of the Kirghiz of the Middle Horde. |
| THE DALAI (<i>Dak'-lye</i>) | Lama of Tibet, the Living Buddha. |
| KIEN LUNG (<i>Keen Loong</i>) | Emperor of China, conqueror of Djungaria. |

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